

Rain with
highs around
60

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January 1, 2026

Pawn Shop readies for kickoff

■ Melrose sports bar plans to open before World Cup

BY EDWIN FOLVEN

The Pawn Shop, a sports bar currently under construction at the corner of Melrose Avenue and Cahuenga Boulevard, is kicking off 2026 with plans for opening in time for the World Cup match between United States and Paraguay on June 12 at SoFi Stadium.

Owner Diego Torres-Palma has been restoring the former Brothers Collateral building on the north-west corner of the intersection

over the past year. Torres-Palma said he is excited about creating a new neighborhood gathering place where sports lovers can root for their favorite teams – something that is sorely missing from the area now, he added.

“There’s a real sense of alignment right now,” Torres-Palma said. “The progress on site is catching up with the excitement around the vision, and you can see

See Pawn Shop page 21



photo courtesy of Heather Duffy Boylston

The interior of the Pawn Shop is being meticulously restored ahead of the opening later this year.

Beverly Hills prepares for Metro D Line subway extension opening

■ City creates response plan for homelessness

BY TABOR BREWSTER

The city of Beverly Hills is preparing for the opening of its first Metro train station. With the La Cienega station expected to open by March, the Beverly Hills City Council, city staff and the Beverly Hills Police Department are taking action to ensure public safety when Beverly Hills becomes connected to the greater Los Angeles area by subway.

Construction is nearly complete on Section One of the D Line subway extension project. In the first quarter of 2026, the Wilshire/La Brea, Wilshire/Fairfax and Wilshire/La Cienega stations are anticipated to open.

“The remaining work focuses on final testing, finishing touches inside the stations, and preparing the system for service,” a statement from Metro read. “This includes completing systems integration testing, final punch-list items, safety certifications and restoring the streets and sidewalks around the stations. These final steps are taken to ensure the stations, tunnels, trains and support

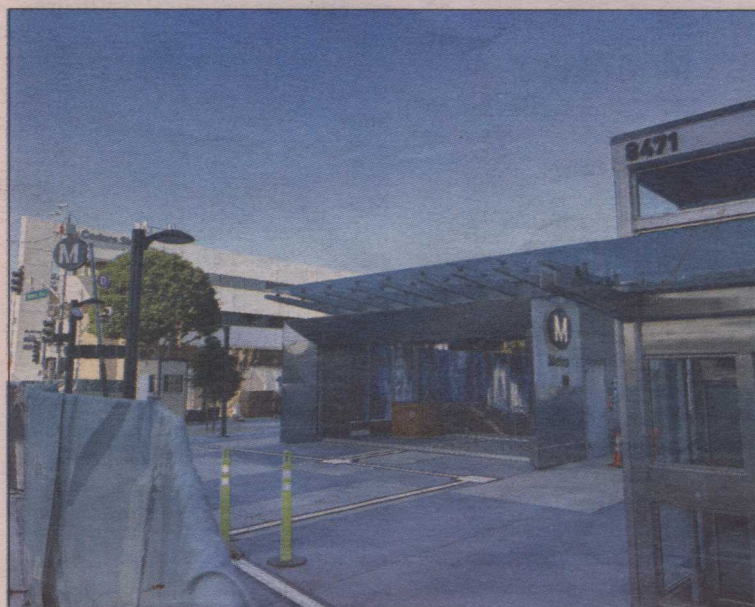


photo by Tabor Brewster

The La Cienega Metro station is expected to open by March.

systems all operate safely and reliably before opening.”

At a recent City Council study session, Beverly Hills Human Services Administrator Enisha Clark presented an overview of the steps city staff is taking to prepare for the La Cienega station’s opening.

“While the expansion brings important transportation benefits, it also creates new operational considerations during late-night and early morning hours,” Clark said.

She explained that because of the construction timeline, the La Cienega stop will temporarily function as an end-of-line station. While the Metro D Line will eventually connect Downtown Los Angeles to Westwood, the next section scheduled to be completed – which includes the Beverly Drive and Century City Stations – will not open until 2027. During this time, the La Cienega Station will be

See Metro page 21

2025 designed a new Beverly Hills skyline

■ Planning Commission approved nine builder’s remedy projects

BY TABOR BREWSTER



Jackie Rocco looks ahead to new position in WeHo

■ Longtime West Hollywood staffer takes

Byers said. “Over the past several months, the city conducted

Beverly Press/Park Labrea News

11 December 25, 2025

Metro work continues into new year on D Line extension subway project

Work on Metro’s D Line subway extension project is ongoing through the end of the year around the subway station at Wilshire/La Cienega. However, no street-level work is occurring until Jan. 2 around the Beverly Drive station in Beverly Hills due to a holiday moratorium on construction.

At the Wilshire/La Cienega station, crews are completing repair work on curbs and sidewalks and are installing pedestrian ramps along Wilshire Boulevard. A median is being constructed in the middle of Wilshire Boulevard near Tower Drive. Two lanes of traffic remain open in each direction on Wilshire Boulevard. Hamilton and Tower drives may be intermittently closed during street restoration work.

Although no street-level construction is occurring around the Beverly Drive station until Jan. 2, work is still ongoing on the underground station. K-rail enclosures remain in place along the north and south curb lanes of Wilshire Boulevard near Beverly Drive. Two lanes are open in each direction between Beverly and Crescent drives.

At the Century City station, crews are restoring utilities for the station in preparation for upcoming deck removal. The process of removing deck panels and restoring the street is expected to begin soon along the project footprint on Constellation Boulevard between Century Park East to a location just west of Avenue of the Stars. Traffic control will be implemented in four

phases from east to west.

Decking removal at the Westwood/UCLA station is postponed until Jan. 2 at 11 p.m. The work is anticipated to run through 6 a.m. on Monday, Jan. 5, and will require the closure of westbound Wilshire Boulevard between Veteran Avenue and Westwood Boulevard, as well as the reduction of eastbound Wilshire to two lanes between Veteran Avenue and Westwood Boulevard. Decking removal is anticipated to require an additional 10 weekends of work at the site, ending in late January.

For questions and concerns about the D Line Extension project, call the 24-hour project hotline at (213)922-6934, email the project team at purplelineext@metro.net or visit metro.net.



photo by Edwin Folven

Crews are completing street restoration work around the Wilshire/La Cienega station.



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Los Angeles, CA 90046

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Serving Beverly Hills, West Hollywood, Hancock Park and Miracle Mile

December 25, 2025

2025: A year like no other

Twelve months marked by tragedy, loss, chaos, resilience and hope

BY EDWIN FOLVEN

Seven days into 2025, the biggest disaster since the 1994 Northridge earthquake devastated the city, setting the stage for a long recovery that is still unfolding a year later. As the strongest winds in decades barreled down on the city on Jan. 7, 2025, tens of thousands of people were forced to flee the Pacific Palisades, Malibu, Altadena and Pasadena as wildfires swept through entire neighborhoods, destroying everything in their path. A day later on Jan. 8, the winds continued relentlessly, fanning flames in Runyon Canyon during the Sunset fire, forcing thousands more to flee northern Hollywood for safety. While the Sunset fire was largely extinguished by the next morning, the Palisades and Eaton fires were not fully contained for 24 days. In the end, 31 people lost their lives in the devastating January wildfires and more than 16,000 homes and buildings were destroyed.

Nearly everyone in Los Angeles, Beverly Hills and West Hollywood knows someone who was impacted by the tragedy, the effects of which will be felt for years to come. Reports estimate that the Palisades and Eaton fires caused \$8.9 billion in lost economic output in L.A. County. The cost to rebuild will be in the billions.



photo by Tabor Brewster

Smoke from the Palisades fire darkened the sky on Jan. 7 as flames devastated entire communities.

In the aftermath of the blaze, the spirit of resiliency took shape almost immediately – even before the flames were fully extinguished. In Hollywood, the Magic Castle hosted a relief effort for fire survivors a week after the fires started, allowing victims to select clothing and necessities donated by the community.

The city of West Hollywood activated its WeHo Responds network, accepting donations and routing them to organizations providing fire relief. The city of Beverly Hills launched a similar relief effort, accepting donations and supporting those who were sheltering at the Dream Center in Hollywood. The relief efforts continued throughout the following months in an effort to provide aid to as many people as possible.

The city and county of Los Angeles also stepped in quickly, declaring an emergency and offering \$31.7 million in immediate financial assistance to victims. Over the following months, the Federal Emergency Management Agency made more than \$3 billion available for homeowners, renters and businesses impacted by the disaster, and the state of California provided nearly \$2.5 billion. As the year progressed, the devastating wildfires continued to make headlines, placing them among the most far-reaching disasters that shaped the Los Angeles area in 2025. As the start of 2026 approaches, the effort to recover and rebuild is still unfolding and will remain an important story in the future of the city.

While the fires dominated the headlines over the past year, many other people and events shaped the cities of Los Angeles, Beverly Hills and West Hollywood. Several major projects were approved or began construction, while others entered final stages. New leaders took the reins in West Hollywood and Beverly Hills, while changes in the federal government also shaped the community. With the new year only days away, here is a look

See 2025 page 21

Friedman reflects on first year

■ Congresswoman outlines how she plans to serve constituents in 2026

BY RANCE COLLINS

One year since Rep. Laura Friedman (D-Glendale) was sworn in, replacing the long-standing 30th District representative-turned-Sen. Adam Schiff (D-Calif.), the congresswoman is looking back on her freshman experience. Almost immediately after her term began, a litany of unprecedented challenges hit the Los Angeles area – from the wildfires to the national guard deployment downtown to the fight for increased film and television production in the city.

Friedman said that her focus has remained on fighting for the issues that are most important to her constituents.

"It's a very tough time for



photo courtesy the office of Laura Friedman
Rep. Laura Friedman volunteered with the Hollywood Food Coalition for Thanksgiving.

California and the district under the Trump administration. [President Donald] Trump has

See Friedman page 22

Hope floats

■ Fire survivors ride down path with optimism for a rosy future

BY EDWIN FOLVEN

Just under a year since raging wildfires destroyed entire neighborhoods in the Pacific Palisades, Malibu and Altadena, survivors who lost their homes and properties will ride aboard a float in the Rose Parade on Jan. 1 in a symbolic show of unity and renewal.

The centerpiece of the float, titled "Rising Together," is a phoenix rising from the ashes, flanked by California golden poppies and 31 sunflowers representing the 31 people who lost their lives in the tragic January 2025 wildfires. The float, co-sponsored by California Community Foundation and the



photo by Edwin Folven

The "Rising Together" float, shown under construction on Dec. 15, features a phoenix rising above golden poppies and native plants depicting the Southern California landscape.

Black Freedom Fund, incorporates depictions of the San Gabriel Mountains where the Eaton fire erupted, and ocean waves and shoreline elements

honoring the coastal communities of Pacific Palisades and Malibu. Creatively adorned with many native plants,

See Rose page 22



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CALIFORNIA

FRIDAY, DECEMBER 5, 2025 :: LATIMES.COM/CALIFORNIA



GAYLE LAIRD

CLAUDE, WHO LIVED at the Academy of Sciences and appeared on billboards and in children's books, was 30 — young for his species.

The swamp king has left his habitat

San Francisco mourns Claude, an albino alligator and unofficial mascot

BY HAILEY BRANSON-POTTS

Claude, a rare albino alligator whose ghostly white scales and statue-like stillness earned him a cultlike following around the world, died Tuesday, according to the California Academy of

Sciences in San Francisco. He was 30.

The cause was end-stage liver cancer, Bart Shepherd, director of the museum's Steinhart Aquarium, said in an interview Wednesday night.

A connoisseur of fish heads (preferably trout) and just-unfrozen rats dubbed

"ratsicles," Claude had been closely monitored in recent weeks because of a waning appetite. He was moved out of his publicly viewable swamp habitat to be treated for a suspected infection and had seemed to be responding well to antibiotics before he was found dead early Tuesday, Shepherd said.

A necropsy was conducted at the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine, revealing that cancerous tumors had overtaken "almost the entire liver," Shepherd said.

Hatched at a Louisiana alligator farm on Sept. 15, 1995, Claude rose to fame in San Francisco, where he

spent the last 17 years living at the Academy of Sciences aquarium in Golden Gate Park.

Claude became an unofficial mascot for the City by the Bay, where he appeared on billboards and advertisements at bus and light-rail stations. He was the subject

[See Alligator, B2]

Two arrested in protest at synagogue over Israeli defense tech

BY GAVIN J. QUINTON

Police arrested two people after a protest escalated into conflict at a Koreatown temple on Wednesday. The turmoil followed a demonstration in opposition to a private event at the Audrey Irmas Pavilion at Wilshire Boulevard Temple headlined by Israeli defense technology personnel.

Los Angeles police were on scene just after 10 a.m., department spokesman Jeff Lee said in an interview. There, they detained two individuals who were being held by temple security amid the disturbance.

"They were blocking the

Voices GUSTAVO ARELLANO COLUMNIST

Short and beautiful SoCal books for our doomscrolling times

Many don't want to read for fun when trying to wade through the online information sewer. But give these local titles a try.



DON LEACH Daily Pilot

Amid the fusillade of terrible headlines this year, one pierced my nerdy heart.

"Enjoying this headline? You're a rarity: Reading for pleasure is declining ..." was the top-ter to a story by my colleague Hailey Branson-Potts in August. Pleasure reading among American adults fell more than 40% in two decades — a continuation of a trend going back to the 1940s.

I get it. We don't want to read for fun when we're trying to wade through the sewer of information we find online and make sense of our terrible political times. But as Tyrion Lannister, the wily hero of George R.R. Martin's "A Game of Thrones" series, said, "A mind needs books as a sword needs a whetstone. If it is to

Palisades High will reopen campus in January

Classes will be held in portable buildings as a \$266-million repair project continues.

BY HOWARD BLUME

Palisades Charter High School students are scheduled to return to their campus in January, one year after the Palisades fire devastated their community and badly damaged the popular school, displacing some 3,000 students.

The plan is for students to use the approximately 70% of campus that was damaged by smoke but not destroyed as well as portable buildings that will temporarily occupy the baseball field.

"For the buildings ... that are intact, we're going through the industrial cleaning process and getting those buildings repaired," Issam Dahdul, a senior facilities administrator, said in a presentation Tuesday to a committee of the Board of Education. The property occupied by the independent charter school is owned by the Los Angeles Unified School District.

"We're hoping they'll be able to return after winter break," Dahdul said. "They have not cleared all of the environmental clearances yet, so we're still working on that, and we're going to continue to work with that community to inform them as to when it's safe to return to those buildings."

The school district estimates the cost of setting up the temporary campus at about \$30 million, which includes installing roughly 30 portable classrooms along with administrative and restroom facilities, and site preparation for interim recreation areas and hardscaping and landscaping, according to a district statement. The cost also includes "comprehensive site work," including utility installation, surveys, and architectural and engineering costs, the district said.

The full \$266.6-million project, which will include a new classroom building and a restored baseball field, is expected to be finished by the third quarter of 2029.

The return to campus will allow students to leave temporary quarters at the former Sears building in Santa Monica.

After the fire, the school operated online for four months — using strategies similar to those developed during the campus closures of the COVID-19 pandemic. By the time the vacant Sears building was refitted and repurposed, about 1 in 6 students had left the school, either because other options



LEONIDAS HERNANDEZ, left, and Joseph McTigue work on the San Diego Zoo Safari Park float Tuesday.

ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

Weather is elephant in the room

It hasn't rained on the Rose Parade since '06, but officials say they are ready for it.

BY ALEX WIGGLESWORTH

More wet weather is on tap for Southern California this week, which may result in the first rainy Rose Parade in two decades.

The rain is forecast to reach the Los Angeles area between sunset on New Year's Eve and the morning of New Year's Day, said Mike Wofford, meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Oxnard. The heaviest precipitation probably will fall on New Year's Day and Saturday, with light showers the Friday in between, Wofford said.

In total, the storms are expected to drop 1 to 3 inches of rain in valley and coastal areas and 3 to 5 inches in the mountains — amounts that, although substantial, are less than what fell during the atmospheric river storms that caused flooding, debris flows and a tornado last week, Wofford said. Still, some flooding is likely, he said, since waterways are still swollen and soils still saturated from those earlier storms.

The weather could also create a soggy experience for the hundreds of thousands of people who flock to Pasadena each year to watch floats and bands wind their way down 5.5 miles of Orange Grove, Colorado and [See Parade, A9]

Early snowpack below average

The state's first survey of the season is disappointing despite recent storms. CALIFORNIA, B1



MARIO TAMA Getty Images

MT. BALDY, L.A.'s landmark backdrop, is one of the nation's deadliest peaks.

3 hikers dead on Mt. Baldy; calls grow for trail closures

Officials urge Forest Service to address dangers

BY ALEX WIGGLESWORTH

Three people were found dead on Mt. Baldy, days after a winter storm blanketed the peaks of the San Gabriel Mountains with snow.

Around 11:30 a.m. Monday, search and rescue teams responded to a request to find an injured man, 19, who had fallen 500 feet while hiking near Devil's Backbone, a sharp ridge flanked by steep drops that leads to the summit, the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department said in a news release. A friend traveling with the man had hiked to an area with cell-

phone service and provided GPS coordinates to rescuers, officials said.

A sheriff's air rescue team spotted the injured hiker, along with two other unidentified people, from a helicopter, but strong winds made it unsafe to carry out a rescue that day, the release states.

Around 7:30 p.m., a Los Angeles County airship was able to hoist down an air medic, who confirmed all three people were dead, officials said. Severe winds again prevented the helicopter from recovering them, the officials said.

"This heartbreaking incident is yet another reminder of the extreme dan-

gers posed by the mountain during winter weather and the urgent need for stronger preventative measures," San Bernardino County Supervisor Dawn Rowe said in a statement.

An operation to recover the three bodies was underway Tuesday, the Sheriff's Department said. The 19-year-old's identity was not released. The other two bodies had not been identified, and it was unclear how long they had been on the mountain, authorities said.

The incident adds to the mountain's grim record as one of the nation's deadliest and prompted renewed calls from elected officials [See Mt. Baldy, A9]

L.A. accused of ignoring state fire safety rules

The city permitted development in high-risk areas, lawsuit says, citing 75 examples.

BY NOAH HAGGERTY

The city of Los Angeles repeatedly ignored state wildfire safety regulations as it permitted new development in areas with severe fire hazards, a lawsuit filed Dec. 23 in L.A. County Superior Court alleges.

The lawsuit, brought by the State Alliance for Fire-safe Road Regulations and the Federation of Hillside and Canyon Assns., provided 75 examples of building permits and other plans approved by the city that the lawsuit alleges violate requirements known as the state's "minimum firesafe regulations."

The regulations require wide, flat roads with only short dead-end offshoots to ensure easy evacuation for residents and easy access for fire crews in fire-prone areas. They also require strategic fuel breaks to slow the progression of flames,

standardized fire hydrants and water sources to aid the firefight, and when practical, at least 30 feet between buildings and the property lines to limit the spread of fire between homes.

In 2021 the Legislature expanded the areas where these rules apply to include not only the wildlands where the state's firefighters respond to fires, but also "very high" fire hazard areas within cities such as Los Angeles. Yet fire safety watchdogs say the regulations are inconsistently enforced.

"It's so tragic that good legislation supported by clear direction from the state attorney general goes woefully ignored because oversight and enforcement are lacking," said Marylee Guinon, president of the State Alliance for Firesafe Road Regulations, a nonprofit founded in 2021 to protect the minimum firesafe regulations. "Existing communities and future communities are at risk."

The lawsuit is the latest instance of fire safety watchdogs teaming up with residential groups to stop unrestrained development in [See Fire, A9]

Some aid groups barred from Gaza

Israel is suspending about three dozen for not meeting new staff, funding data rules.

BY MELANIE LIDMAN AND SAM MEDNICK

JERUSALEM — Israel on Tuesday said it will suspend more than three dozen humanitarian organizations, including Doctors Without Borders, for failing to meet its new rules to vet international organizations working in the Gaza Strip.

The Ministry of Diaspora Affairs said that the organizations facing bans Thursday didn't meet new requirements for sharing staff, funding and operations information. It accused Doctors Without Borders, one of the largest health organizations operating in Gaza, of failing to clarify the roles of some staffers whom Israel accused of cooperation with Hamas and other militant

groups.

International organizations have said that Israel's rules are arbitrary and could endanger staff.

Doctors Without Borders, also known as Medecins Sans Frontieres, or MSF, in French, didn't immediately respond to a request for comment. Israel previously accused its staff of involvement in militant activities in Gaza in 2024. At the time, the group said that it would never knowingly employ people engaged in militant activity.

Other major organizations whose permits weren't renewed include the Norwegian Refugee Council, CARE International, the International Rescue Committee and divisions of major charities such as Oxfam and Caritas, according to a list from the ministry. The organizations help with a variety of social services, including food distribution, health care, disability services, education and mental health.

[See Gaza, A4]



English teacher Jocelyn Medawar has noticed a new vibe at Harvard-Westlake School this school year: Upper school students are chatting in the halls and

School uses app to fight addictive apps

fied for now as scofflaws during school hours: TikTok, Instagram, Snapchat, X, Discord, Threads, Pokemon Go, Roblox, Clash Royale and Reddit.

... and, what Disney ... and Trader Joe's — broke down, probably because of wet conditions, according to the report.

This year, Pasadena officials are anticipating more medical calls for things such as hypothermia and foot injuries from marching in wet socks, city spokesperson Lisa Derderian said.

She also expects an uptick in warming bonfires — “in the past we’ve seen people that will throw firewood into a washing machine drum” — which can injure bystanders or ignite nearby structures. Each year, officers drive down the parade route and tell people to extinguish them, she said.

Spectators should remember that fires must be in professionally manufactured barbecues at least 1 foot off the ground, and tents are forbidden, Derderian said. Those planning to spend the night should instead opt for weather-rated sleeping bags, waterproof clothes and hand warmers, she said.

Umbrellas are prohibited in the parade grandstands, and spectators are encouraged to leave them at home if they’re standing elsewhere along the route, said Candy Carlson, a spokesperson for the Tournament of Roses. Float riders will have ponchos on standby, and there will be plenty of tow trucks available to haul any displays that break down, she added.

Residents who live near Rose Bowl Stadium should prepare for the possibility that some cars will need to park on neighborhood streets, as the grass in the overflow game parking area probably will be too saturated, Derderian said.

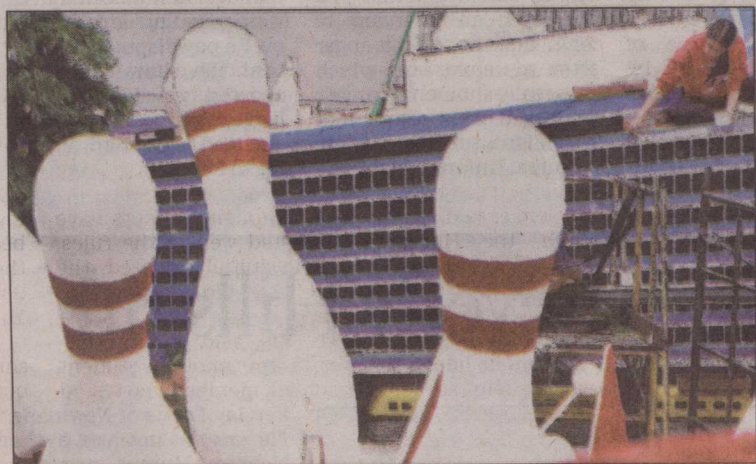
The city does not plan to order additional staffing due to the weather, as most employees will already be on duty, she said.

“Pretty much if you work for the city of Pasadena, you’re working either New Year’s Eve or New Year’s Day, whether you’re police, fire or public works,” she said. “It’s an all-hands-on-deck situation.”



Photographs by ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

ISABELLE MULLICAN decorates the UPS Store’s float. Mullican and hundreds of other volunteers are working on floats for the parade.



THE PRINCESS CRUISES float entry is decorated Tuesday.



WORK is done on Mississippi’s float, featuring Kermit the Frog.

3 hikers killed on Mt. Baldy; recovery blocked

[Mt. Baldy, from A1] for the U.S. Forest Service to close its trails during hazardous conditions.

Rising 10,064 feet above sea level, Mt. Baldy is instantly recognizable as the backdrop to the Los Angeles skyline. That proximity is a draw for both experienced hikers and those who are ill-prepared for the terrain and weather, which can be up to 40 degrees cooler than the basin below.

Hikers consider Devil’s Backbone to be challenging under the best conditions, as its sheer drop-offs leave little margin for error. But during the winter, snow, ice and wind transform the popular trail into a treacherous mountaineering route

that requires gear such as crampons and an ice ax to travel safely.

There have been more than 100 rescues on Mt. Baldy since 2020, and 14 deaths, including that of actor Julian Sands, who went missing on the mountain in January 2023. His remains were found nearly six months later.

Although Mt. Baldy is under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Forest Service, San Bernardino County shoulders the primary burden for responding to emergencies there, Rowe said. The steady march of search-and-rescue calls have caused the Sheriff’s Department to spend millions of taxpayer dollars while placing first respond-

ers at risk, often during life-threatening winter storms, she said.

Those dynamics led San Bernardino County Sheriff Shannon Dicus in 2023 to call for the Forest Service to temporarily close the mountain during unsafe weather conditions, and to put in place a permitting process to track the number of hikers and educate them about the risks. County supervisors continue to support those interventions, Rowe said.

The Forest Service closed the area from 10 p.m. Monday to 11:59 p.m. Wednesday but did not say whether the closure was related to the hikers’ deaths or the recovery effort.

The agency is currently evaluating ways to improve visitor safety in the area and expects more progress in the coming months, a Forest Service spokesperson said in a statement.

“Even in popular and frequently visited areas, conditions can change quickly — particularly during winter weather — and can present serious, sometimes unpredictable hazards to visitors,” the statement said.

People should understand their personal limits, prepare and check conditions before heading into the mountains, the agency said.

U.S. Rep. Judy Chu (D-Monterey Park), whose district includes Mt. Baldy, said in a statement that she’s

worked closely with both the Forest Service and the Sheriff’s Department to promote hiker safety in the area, including by convening a 2023 roundtable on how to prevent future tragedies. After that discussion, the agencies improved coordination to strengthen outreach efforts with clearer public messaging, enhanced trailhead signage and expanded volunteer outreach at key access points and visitor centers, she said.

“While these steps are important, more work remains,” Chu said. “Once all the facts related to this case are known, we must continue working together to further enhance safety for hikers.”

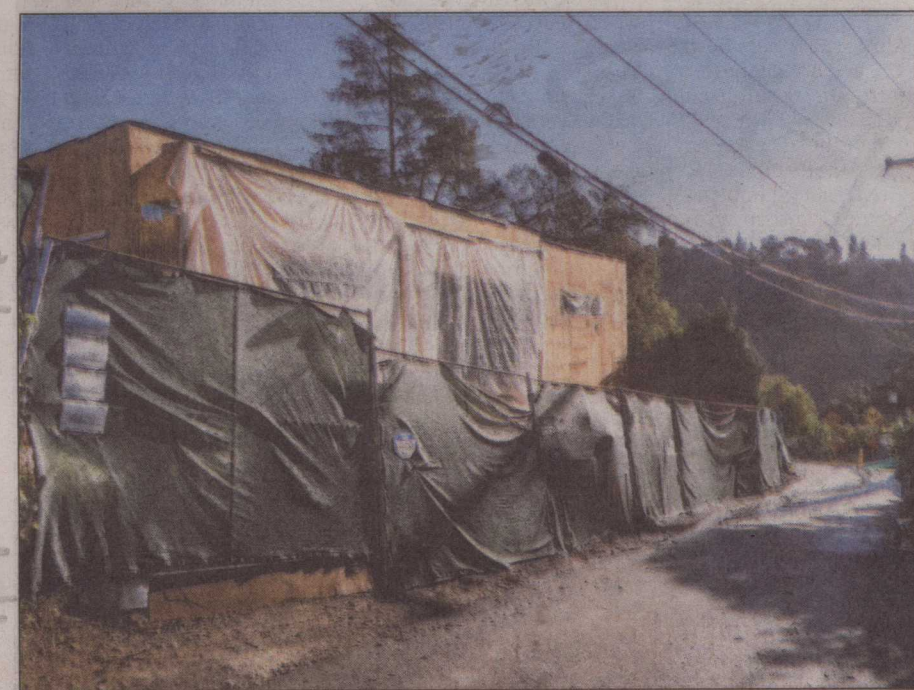
Nonprofits sue L.A. over fire safety regulations and developments

[Fire, from A1] hazardous areas as the state pushes to address its housing crisis.

After the January fires, investigations by The Times found that while L.A. and state officials have taken steps to adopt stricter fire-safety standards in recent decades, they did little to slow increasing development in the city’s wildlands and struggled to adopt and enforce regulations designed to protect vulnerable communities. When The Times inquired whether the city had analyzed its evacuation routes as mandated by a 2019 law, for example, city and state officials all either failed to point to an analysis in line with the state’s guidelines or claimed the responsibility lay with a different agency.

After the 1980 Panorama fire in San Bernardino County that killed four, the state Legislature required the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection to research and then label areas across the state with “moderate,” “high” and “very high” levels of fire hazard. These maps are meant to determine where the state should enforce stricter fire safety standards.

Over the years Cal Fire has expanded these hazard zones, while the Legislature has continued adding safety requirements for areas within them, based on lessons learned from past wildfires.



MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times

CONSTRUCTION on Sandal Lane has caught the eye of fire safety watchdogs.

Today the hazard zones are referenced in more than 50 sections of the California Codes. Los Angeles, the largest city in the state, has more acres in very high fire hazard zones than any of its other cities.

Before filing the lawsuit, the Hillside Federation, a nonprofit representing roughly four dozen homeowner and resident associations in the Santa Monica Mountains, challenged the city on one permit approval it found particularly egregious.

In April the city’s Department of Building and Safety issued permits for the construction of a new single-family home on a vacant lot nestled between Bel-Air and Beverly Crest. Weeks later the Hillside Federation appealed the department’s decision, arguing the project was too far down a dead-end road that is too steep and narrow for firetrucks.

In September the Board of Building and Safety Commissioners denied the appeal.

“What we allege, and I be-

lieve to be true, is that the city was systematically ignoring the regulations and allowing developments to proceed in these very high fire hazard severity zones,” said Jamie Hall, an attorney with the Channel Law Group who is representing the plaintiffs.

The Department of Building and Safety did not immediately respond to a request for comment; the Los Angeles city attorney’s office said it does not comment on pending litigation.

Wildfire risk has compli-

“Why did it have to come to this? Why couldn’t the city, in light of this horrific, tragic incident ... just do what was required?”

— JAMIE HALL, plaintiffs’ attorney

cated the state’s fraught housing debate, often shaped by pro-development “yes in my backyard” advocates and local “not in my backyard” groups that don’t want to see their own neighborhoods radically transformed.

Resident groups and fire safety organizations have made natural allies, fighting any attempts by the state to waive existing development regulations in fire-prone areas and forcing local governments to follow the regulations that are on the books.

That coalition has become especially vocal in Pacific Palisades.

One law already on the books would have allowed homeowners in the Palisades to rebuild single-family homes as duplexes — until backlash led Gov. Gavin Newsom to create an exception for fire-prone

areas. A bill to create a local authority that could complete rebuilds on behalf of homeowners was doomed by misinformation claiming it would instead create an explosion of dense, low-income housing. And residents still are worried officials will find a way to apply a new law aimed at increasing density near transit stops to the Palisades, even though the enclave does not have any stops that would qualify.

Residents, with January’s terrifyingly slow evacuation still fresh in their minds, fear added density would only make evacuations worse. And as they mourn the loss of their neighborhoods, regulations that could further quash the possibility of ever regaining that sense of community have only added insult to injury.

The lawsuit does not take issue with any Palisades rebuilding permits but does point to the destruction and evacuation challenges during the fire as a warning: Further development in dangerous areas with little consideration for safety can only worsen the next disaster.

“Why did it have to come to this? Why couldn’t the city, in light of this horrific, tragic incident ... just do what was required?” Hall said. “Why do they constantly have to be sued in order to just do the right thing?”



ALEX BRANDON Associated Press

DEFENSE Secretary Pete Hegseth speaks last week at Mar-a-Lago in Florida as President Trump looks on.

Trump's plans for Venezuela remain shrouded in confusion

[Venezuela, from A1] tainly confused about it," he said.

"It would make sense for them to do something like that, rather than a military strike, especially right now when there's a delicate line between military operations and other things," Ellis added. "My sense is — to the extent the president has acknowledged it — that this was them carrying out their mission to shape the battlespace in support of broader national objectives."

But Trump has yet to articulate the full scope of those objectives, leaving observers to wonder whether regime change in Venezuela is his true, ultimate aim.

Trump has repeatedly told the media that Maduro's days in power are numbered. The administration refers to him and his regime as an illegitimate narco-state terrorizing American communities. On a bipartisan basis, going back to Trump's first term and throughout the Biden administration, the United States has recognized a democratic opposition in Venezuela as its rightful government.

But a military war on the drug trade would make little sense targeting Venezuela, where only a fraction of illicit narcotics smuggled into the United States originate. Trump has hinted in recent



FEDERICO PARRA AFP/Getty Images

A CROWD celebrates Holy Innocents' Day in Caucagua, Miranda state, Venezuela, on Sunday.

weeks at other motives driving his calculus.

Over the last four months, the Trump administration slowly ramped up its pressure campaign on Maduro, first by targeting boats allegedly carrying narcotics and drug smugglers in international waters before announcing a blockade of Venezuelan oil tankers. Venezuela's oil exports have consequently plummeted by half over the course of the last month.

On Wednesday, the Treasury Department also issued sanctions against

four companies that it said were either operating in Venezuela's oil sector or as accompanying oil tankers.

"Maduro's regime increasingly depends on a shadow fleet of worldwide vessels to facilitate sanctionable activity, including sanctions evasion, and to generate revenue for its destabilizing operations," the department said in a statement. "Today's action further signals that those involved in the Venezuelan oil trade continue to face significant sanctions risks."

The Pentagon, mean-

while, has stationed nearly a quarter of the U.S. naval fleet in the Caribbean since the summer, in what Trump has referred to as a "massive armada" without precedent in the region.

Although Venezuela's current oil output is modest, the nation sits on the world's largest known oil reserves, offering significant potential access to any future strategic partners. China is currently the largest importer of Venezuelan oil, and at least one tanker subjected to the U.S. blockade has sought protection from Moscow, Maduro's chief military ally.

Addressing the blockade in an exchange with reporters, Trump said he had spoken with top U.S. oil executives about what the Venezuelan market would look like with Maduro no longer in power. And he suggested the U.S. government would keep whatever barrels are seized, hearkening back to Trump's campaign, throughout the 2010s, for the United States to control the oil fields of Iraq as the spoils of its war there.

"We're going to keep it," Trump said last week, of the 1.9 million barrels of Venezuelan oil on the first tanker seized. "Maybe we'll sell it. Maybe we'll keep it. Maybe we'll use it in the strategic reserves. We're keeping it."

"We're keeping the ships, also," he added.

Mamdani era in NYC starts with a pair of events

By ANTHONY IZAGUIRRE

Zohran Mamdani will become mayor of New York City as the clock ticks over into 2026 — but the celebrations are set to last through New Year's Day.

The Democrat's team is planning two separate swearing-in ceremonies Thursday — a small, private one with his family in an old subway station around midnight, followed by a large event in the afternoon that will include a public block party outside City Hall.

As a new mayor's term begins immediately with the new year, it has been customary for the city's incoming leaders to hold two events. Departing Mayor Eric Adams held his initial swearing-in at Times Square shortly after the famous ball drop, and Adams' predecessor Bill de Blasio took his first oath at home in Brooklyn.

For his part, Mamdani will take his initial oath at the former City Hall subway station in Manhattan — one of the city's original stops on its subterranean transit system, known for its tiled arches and vaulted ceilings.

New York Atty. Gen. Letitia James, a political ally and notable foe of President Trump, will administer the oath of office.

The old City Hall stop was designed as the flagship station of the city's first subway line but was decommissioned in 1945. These days, outside of occasional guided historical tours, locals can usually only catch a glimpse of it by staying on the 6 train after its last stop downtown when it turns around to head north.

In a statement, Mamdani's office said the choice to be sworn in at the station re-

flected his "commitment to the working people who keep our city running every day."

"When Old City Hall Station first opened in 1904 — one of New York's 28 original subway stations — it was a physical monument to a city that dared to be both beautiful and build great things that would transform working peoples' lives," Mamdani said.

"That ambition need not be a memory confined only to our past, nor must it be isolated only to the tunnels beneath City Hall; it will be the purpose of the administration fortunate enough to serve New Yorkers from the building above," he said.

On Thursday afternoon, Mamdani will be sworn in again, this time by U.S. Sen. Bernie Sanders, one of his political heroes, on the steps of City Hall in a ceremony. It's scheduled to kick off at 1 p.m. with opening remarks from U.S. Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, another political ally and a fellow New Yorker.

Mamdani's transition formed an inaugural committee that includes actor John Turturro, playwright Cole Escola and writer Colson Whitehead, as well as advocates, small-business owners and campaign workers who the incoming mayor's office says have "provided perspective, guidance, and cultural sensibility" for the ceremony.

The public swearing-in will be accompanied by a block party along a stretch of Broadway leading up to City Hall. Mamdani's office expects thousands of people to attend and says there will be performances, music and interfaith elements.

Izaguirre writes for the Associated Press.



ADAM GRAY Bloomberg

ZOHRAN MAMDANI was to be sworn in as mayor of New York in a small ceremony around midnight.

BEN NIGHTHORSE CAMPBELL, 1933 - 2025

Former senator who advocated for Native Americans

ASSOCIATED PRESS

Ben Nighthorse Campbell, the former senator and U.S. representative of Colorado known for his passionate advocacy of Native American issues, died Tuesday. He was 92.

Campbell died of natural causes surrounded by his family, his daughter, Shanan Campbell, confirmed to the Associated Press.

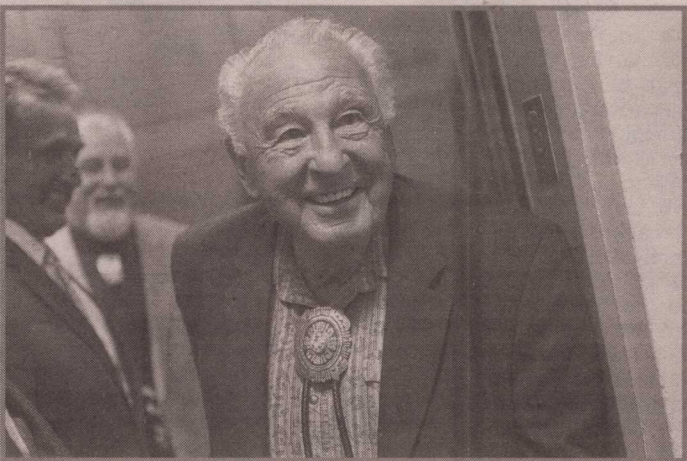
Campbell, a Democrat who stunned his party by joining the Republican Party, stood out in Congress as much for his unconventional dress — cowboy boots, bolo ties and ponytail — as his defense of children's rights, organized

leaders and was considered a coup for the GOP.

"I get hammered from the extremes," he said shortly afterward. "I'm always willing to listen...but I just don't think you can be all things to all people, no matter which party you're in."

Considered a shoo-in for a third Senate term, Campbell stunned supporters when he dropped out of the race in 2004 after a health scare.

"I thought it was a heart attack. It wasn't," said Campbell. "But when I was lying on that table in the hospital looking up at all those doctors' faces, I decided then, 'Do I really need to do this six more years after I've been gone so much from home?' I have two children I didn't get to see grow up, quite frankly."



TOM WILLIAMS CQ Roll Call/AP Images

POLITICAL MAVERICK

Dottie Lamm despite his switch to the GOP. He was the only Native American in the Senate at the time.

He said he was criticized as a Democrat for voting with Republicans, and then pilloried by some newspapers for his stances after the switch.

"It didn't change me. I didn't change my voting record. For instance, I had a sterling voting record as a Democrat on labor. I still do as a Republican. And on minorities and women's issues," he said.

Campbell said his values — liberal on social issues, conservative on fiscal ones — were shaped by his life. Children's causes were dear to him because he and his sister spent

THE NATION

Trump to halt federal child care funds to all states

By CHARLOTTE KRAMON
AND SARAH BRUMFIELD

WASHINGTON — The Trump administration announced it is freezing child care funds to all states until they provide more verification about the programs in a move fueled by a series of fraud schemes at Minnesota day care centers run by Somali residents.

All 50 states will be affected by the review, but the Republican administration is focusing most of its ire on the blue state of Minnesota and is calling for an audit of some of its centers.

Minnesota Democratic Atty. Gen. Keith Ellison said in a statement Wednesday that he was “exploring all our legal options to ensure that critical childcare services do not get abruptly slashed based on pretext and grandstanding.”

It is unclear how much more robust the verification process for other states will be than it already has been.

Deputy Secretary of Health and Human Services Jim O'Neill called the decision a response to “blatant fraud that appears to be rampant in Minnesota and across the country” in a social media post announcing the change Tuesday.

Here are some things to know about these moves:

All 50 states will have to provide additional levels of verification and administrative data before they receive more funding from the Child Care and Development Fund, according to a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services spokesperson. However, Minnesota will have to provide even more verification for child care centers that are



GIOVANNA DELL'ORTO Associated Press

PEOPLE protesting President Trump's insults toward Somalis rally at the Minnesota capitol in St. Paul.

suspected of fraud, such as attendance and licensing records, past enforcement actions and inspection reports.

In his social media post Tuesday, O'Neill said all Administration for Children and Families payments nationwide would require “justification and a receipt or photo evidence” before money is sent, but the department spokesperson said Wednesday that the additional verifications apply only to Child Care and Development Fund payments.

Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz, the 2024 Democratic vice presidential nominee, said in a social media post that fraudsters are a serious issue that the state has spent years cracking down on but that this is a political move that is part of “Trump's long game.”

State Senate Majority

Leader Erin Murphy condemned the move in a statement Wednesday.

“Republicans are playing sick games and winning devastating prizes,” Murphy said. “And now, tens of thousands of Minnesota families will pay the price as Donald's Trump's agents strip away crucial funding.”

The administration launched efforts in recent weeks to track down fraud in other programs in Minnesota and is looking at fraud in blue states such as California and New York, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt said in an interview with “Fox & Friends” on Wednesday.

The administration will continue to send officers to investigate “potential fraud sites” in Minnesota and deport undocumented immigrants, Leavitt said, adding that the Department of

Homeland Security is considering plans to denaturalize citizens.

The Department of Labor is also investigating the state's unemployment insurance program, Leavitt said.

The administration this month threatened to withhold Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program food aid funding from Democratic-controlled states, including Minnesota, unless they provide information about people receiving assistance.

The announcement came a day after U.S. Homeland Security officials conducted a fraud investigation in Minneapolis, questioning workers at unidentified businesses. Trump has criticized Walz's administration over the cases, capitalizing on them to target the Somali diaspora in the state, which

has the largest Somali population in the U.S.

In his post Tuesday, O'Neill, who is serving as acting director of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, referenced a right-wing influencer who posted a video last week claiming he found that day care centers operated by Somali residents in Minneapolis had committed up to \$100 million in fraud.

Meanwhile, there are concerns about harassment that home-based day care providers and members of the Somali community nationwide might face amid the vitriol, including Trump's comments earlier this month referring to Somali immigrants as “garbage.” Washington state Atty. Gen. Nick Brown released a statement saying, “Showing up on someone's porch, threatening, or har-

assing them isn't an investigation. Neither is filming minors who may be in the home.”

Maria Snider, director of the Rainbow Child Development Center and vice president of advocacy group Minnesota Child Care Assn., said fear is rising among both families — many of which are living paycheck to paycheck — and child care centers that rely on the federal funding. Without child care system tuition, centers may have to lay off teachers and shut down classrooms, she said.

In Minnesota, the application process for the funding is complex and multilayered, Snider said. Her own child care center has been subjected to random audits, she said, and all centers are required to submit to licensing visits by officials.

“I don't know what else I would provide,” she said.

Ahmed Hasan, director of the ABC Learning Center that was one of those featured in the video by the right-wing influencer, said Wednesday that there were 56 children enrolled at the center. Since the video was posted, Hasan, who is Somali, said his center has received harassing phone calls making staff members and parents feel unsafe.

He said the center is routinely subject to checks by state regulators to ensure it remains in compliance with their license.

“There's no fraud happening here,” Hasan told the Associated Press. “We are open every day, and we have our records to show that this place is open.”

Kramon and Brumfield write for the Associated Press.

Democrat wins key Iowa state Senate race

By HANNAH
SCHOENBAUM AND
HANNAH FINGERHUT

DES MOINES — Democrat Renee Hardman was elected to the Iowa state Senate on Tuesday in a year-end special election, denying Republicans from reclaiming two-thirds control of the chamber.

Hardman bested Republican Lucas Loftin by an overwhelming margin to win a seat representing parts of the Des Moines suburbs. The seat became vacant after the Oct. 6 death of state Sen. Claire Celsi, a Democrat.

Hardman, the chief executive of nonprofit Lutheran Services of Iowa and a member of the West Des Moines City Council, becomes the first Black woman elected to the 50-member Senate.

“I want to recognize that while my name was the one on the ballot, this race was never just about me,” Hardman told a room of supporters in West Des Moines after declaring victory.

With 99% of votes counted, Hardman led by



Hardman for Iowa

RENEE Hardman is the CEO of a nonprofit.

about 43 percentage points.

Her win is latest in a string of special election victories for Iowa Democrats, who flipped two Senate seats this year to break up a supermajority that had allowed Republicans to easily confirm GOP Gov. Kim Reynolds' appointments to state agencies and commissions.

Democrat Mike Zimmer first flipped a seat in January, winning a district that had strongly favored Republican President Trump in the 2024 election. In August, Democrat Catelin Drey handily defeated her GOP opponent in the Republican

stronghold of northwestern Iowa, giving Democrats 17 seats to Republicans' 33. Celsi's death brought that down to 16.

Republicans would have regained two-thirds control with a Loftin victory Tuesday. Without a supermajority, the party will need to get support from at least one Democrat to approve Reynolds' nominees. The GOP still has significant majorities in both legislative chambers.

Ken Martin, chair of the Democratic National Committee, called Hardman's victory “a major check on Republican power.”

“With the last special election of the year now decided, one thing is clear: 2025 was the year of Democratic victories and overperformance, and Democrats are on track for big midterm elections,” Martin said.

In November the party dominated the first major election day since Trump returned to the White House, notably winning governor's races in Virginia and New Jersey. Democrats held on to a Kentucky state Senate seat this month in a special election. And although Re-

publican Matt Van Epps won a Tennessee special election for a U.S. House seat, the relatively slim margin of victory gave Democrats hope for next year's midterms. The party must net three House seats in 2026 to reclaim the majority and impede Trump's agenda.

Iowa GOP Chairman Jeff Kaufmann applauded Loftin and his supporters for putting up a fight in what he described as “a very tough district.” Democrats outnumbered Republicans by about 3,300 voters, or 37% to 30%.

“Although we fell short this time, the Republican Party of Iowa remains laser-focused on expanding our majorities in the Iowa Legislature and keeping Iowa ruby-red,” Kaufmann said.

The Democratic Legislative Campaign Committee pledged Tuesday to help defend the party's gains in Iowa and prevent the return of a GOP supermajority next year.

Schoenbaum and Fingerhut write for the Associated Press. Schoenbaum reported from Salt Lake City.

Trump's first vetoes: Two bipartisan bills from longtime allies

By MICHELLE L. PRICE
AND MEG KINNARD

WASHINGTON — President Trump issued the first vetoes of his second term on Tuesday, rejecting two low-profile bipartisan bills, a move that had the effect of punishing backers who had opposed the president's positions on other issues.

Trump vetoed drinking water pipeline legislation from Republican Rep. Lauren Boebert of Colorado, a longtime ally who broke with the president in November to release files on convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. He also vetoed legislation that would have given the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida more control of some of its tribal lands. The tribe was among groups suing the administration over an immigration detention center in the Everglades known as “Alligator Alcatraz.”

Both bills had bipartisan support and had been non-controversial until the White House announced Trump's vetoes Tuesday night.

Trump appeared to acknowledge the tribe's opposition to the detention facility in a letter to the

publican Rep. Carlos Gimenez, whom Trump has endorsed. Gimenez and the Miccosukee Tribe were not immediately available for comment on Wednesday.

When asked whether the vetoes were punishment, the White House did not answer and instead referred to Trump's statements explaining the vetoes.

Congress can override the vetoes by a vote of two-thirds of the members of the House and the Senate, but it's unclear if there's enough support in the Republican-controlled chambers to do so, especially heading into a midterm election year where many of them will be on the ballot and many GOP members will count on Trump's backing.

Boebert's legislation, the “Finish the Arkansas Valley Conduit Act,” aimed to improve access to clean drinking water in eastern Colorado.

Although the congresswoman has long been a staunch supporter of Trump, she found herself at odds with the president with her support this year for legislation that required the Justice Department to release files related to Epstein.

Feds reviewing over 5.2 million Epstein records

By STEPHEN GROVES
AND SEUNG-MIN KIM

information has lagged behind the Dec. 19 deadline to

SCIENCE



THE MOON'S shadow covers part of the U.S. and Canada during an August 2024 solar eclipse, as seen from the space station. NASA

A NEW YEAR OF COSMIC WONDERS

Moon and sun loom large in the lineup of events. U.S. astronauts plan lunar visit; others will send robotic landers.

By MARCIA DUNN

CAPE CANAVERAL, Fla. — The moon and sun share top billing in 2026.

Kicking off the year's cosmic wonders is the moon, drawing the first astronauts to visit in more than 50 years as well as a caravan of robotic lunar landers, including Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' new supersized Blue Moon.

A supermoon looms Saturday and an astronomical blue moon is on the books for May.

The sun will also generate buzz with a "ring of fire" annular eclipse at the bottom of the world in February and a total solar eclipse at the top of the world in August. Expect more auroras in unexpected places, though perhaps not as frequently as in the last couple of years.

And that comet that strayed into our neighborhood from another star? Though still visible with powerful backyard telescopes, the recently discovered comet known as 3I/Atlas is fading by the day after swinging past Earth in December. Jupiter is next on its dance card in March. Once the icy outsider departs our solar system a decade from now, it will be back where it belongs in interstellar space.

It's our third known interstellar visitor. Scientists anticipate more.

"I can't believe it's taken this long to find three," said NASA's Paul Chodas, who has been on the lookout since the 1980s. And with ever better technology, "the chance of catching another interstellar visitor will increase."

Here's a rundown on what the universe has in store for us in 2026:

Next stop, moon

NASA's upcoming moonshot commander, Reid Wisema, said

there's a good chance he and his crew will be the first to catch a glimpse of large swaths of the lunar far side that were missed by the Apollo astronauts half a century ago. Their observations could be a boon for geologists, he noted, and other experts picking future landing sites.

Launching early in the year, the three Americans and one Canadian are scheduled to zip past the moon, do a U-turn behind it, then hustle straight back to Earth to close out their 10-day mission. No stopping for a moonwalk — the boot prints will be left by the next crew on a future mission in NASA's Artemis lunar exploration program.

More robotic moon landings are planned by China as well as U.S. companies. Early in the year, Bezos is looking for his Blue Origin rocket company to launch a prototype of the lunar lander it's designing for NASA astronauts. This Blue Moon demo will stand 26 feet, taller than the lander that delivered Apollo's 12 moonwalkers to the lunar sur-

face. The Blue Moon version for the crew will be almost double that height.

Back for another stab at the moon, Astrobotic Technology and Intuitive Machines are also targeting 2026 landings with scientific gear. The only private entity to nail a lunar landing, Firefly Aerospace, will aim for the moon's far side in 2026.

China is targeting the southern polar region in the new year, sending a rover as well as a so-called hopper to jump into permanently shadowed craters in search of ice.

Winter, summer eclipses

The cosmos pulls out all the stops with a total solar eclipse on Aug. 12 that will begin in the Arctic and cross over Greenland, Iceland and Spain. Totality will last two minutes and 18 seconds as the moon moves directly between Earth and the sun to blot out the latter. By contrast, the total solar eclipse in 2027 will offer a whopping 6½ minutes of totality and pass over more countries.

For 2026, the warmup act will be a ring-of-fire eclipse in the Antarctic on Feb. 17, with only a few research stations in prime viewing position. South Africa and southernmost Chile and Argentina will have partial viewing. A total lunar eclipse will follow two weeks after February's annular eclipse, with a partial lunar eclipse closing out the action at the end of August.

Parading planets

Six of the solar system's eight planets will prance across the sky in a must-see lineup around Feb. 28. A nearly full moon is even getting into the act, appearing alongside Jupiter. Spotting Uranus or Neptune will require binoculars or telescopes. But Mercury, Venus, Jupiter and Saturn should be visible with the naked eye shortly after sunset, weather permitting, though Mercury and Venus will be low on the horizon.

Mars will be the lone no-show. The good news is that the red planet will join a six-planet parade in August, with Venus the holdout.

A few supermoons

Three supermoons will brighten up the night skies in 2026, the stunning result when a full moon nudges closer to Earth than usual as it orbits in a not-quite-perfect circle. Appearing bigger and brighter, supermoons are a perennial crowd-pleaser requiring no equipment, only your eyes.

The year's first supermoon in January coincides with a meteor shower, but the moonlight probably will obscure the dimmer fireballs. The second supermoon won't occur until Nov. 24, with the third — the year's final and closest supermoon — occurring the night of Dec. 23 into Dec. 24. This Christmas Eve supermoon will pass within 221,668 miles of Earth.

Spectacular auroras

The sun is expected to churn out more eruptions in 2026 that could lead to geomagnetic storms here on Earth, giving rise to stunning auroras. Solar action should start to ease, however, with the 11-year solar cycle finally on the downslide.

Space weather forecasters such as Rob Steenburgh at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration can't wait to tap into all the solar wind measurements coming soon from an observatory launched in the fall.

"2026 will be an exciting year for space weather enthusiasts," he said in an email, with this new spacecraft and others helping scientists "better understand our nearest star and forecast its impacts."

Dunn writes for the Associated Press.

1 of the 3 hottest years on record, scientists say

By ALEXA ST. JOHN

Climate change worsened by human behavior made 2025 one of the three hottest years on record, scientists said.

It also was the first time the three-year temperature average broke through the threshold set in the Paris climate agreement of 2015 limiting warming to no more than 1.5 degrees Celsius (2.7 degrees Fahrenheit) since preindustrial times. Experts say keeping the Earth below that is "the only way to avoid the worst impacts of climate change."

lions of dollars in damage annually.

WWA scientists identified 157 extreme weather events as most severe this year, meaning they met criteria such as causing more than 100 deaths, affecting more than half an area's population or leading to a state of emergency being declared. Of those they closely analyzed 22.

That included dangerous heat waves, which the WWA said were the world's deadliest extreme weather events this year. The researchers said some of the heat waves they studied were 10 times

spond to and handle their extreme losses and damage.

Negotiations sputter

This year's United Nations climate talks in Brazil in November ended without an explicit plan to transition away from fossil fuels, and though more money was pledged to help countries adapt to climate change, they will take more time to do it.

Officials, scientists and analysts have conceded that Earth's warming will overshoot 1.5 degrees Celsius, though some say reversing that trend remains possible.

Nations are seeing varying levels of progress.

China is rapidly deploying renewable energies including solar and wind power — but also continuing to invest in coal. Though increasingly frequent extreme

California mandates folic acid in tortillas

By ANA B. IBARRA

Tortillas sold in California are going to have a new ingredient, one that's intended to help nurture infants.

Starting Thursday, a new law will take effect requiring most tortillas and corn masa products sold in the state to contain folic acid, a vitamin that's important to infant health.

Latinas in California are far less likely than other women to get enough folic acid early in preg-

born with neural tube defects dropped by about a third, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

But even with the addition to these foods, birth defect rates among babies born to Latinas have been consistently higher. In search of a more culturally appropriate addition, in 2016, the federal government allowed makers of corn masa to add folic acid to their foods — but didn't require it.

Joaquin Arambula, a Democrat from Fresno who's the author of the law, said he's "excited" about

Los Angeles Times

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times.com

Trump's plan for Maduro remains unclear

His revelation of a covert CIA strike in Venezuela set off a scramble in D.C.

By MICHAEL WILNER

WASHINGTON — The day after Christmas is typically quiet in the nation's capital. But President Trump's decision to acknowledge a covert U.S. strike on Venezuelan territory, in an interview with an obscure local news outlet on Friday, set off a scramble in a drowsy Washington that has become a hallmark of the president.

Officials working on Latin America policy for the administration that had been closely tracking reports of refinery fires and other curious events throughout Venezuela couldn't immediately figure out which target the president was talking about, three sources familiar with the matter told The Times.

Trump would later detail that the strike targeted a "dock area where they load the boats up with drugs." But initial confusion from within his own government signaled just how tight a circle within the West Wing is determining whether to climb the escalation ladder toward war with Caracas.

Trump initially confirmed he had authorized CIA actions in Venezuela in an exchange with reporters in October. Although the administration is obligated to report covert CIA operations to Congress, more robust congressional authorization is required for the use of military force.

"I authorized for two reasons, really. No. 1, they have emptied their prisons into the United States of America," Trump said at the time. "And the other thing, the drugs, we have a lot of drugs coming in from Venezuela, and a lot of the Venezuelan drugs come in through the sea."

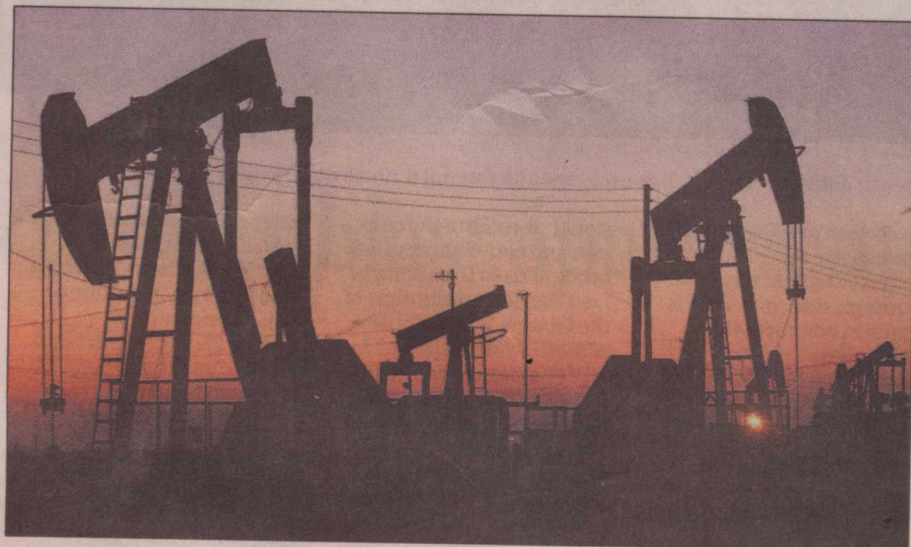
The strike comes as Venezuelan authorities have increased the number of U.S. citizens detained in their custody, the New York Times first reported on Friday. Caracas had freed 17 Americans and permanent residents held in notorious Venezuelan prisons at the start of the Trump administration.

Evan Ellis, who served in Trump's first term planning State Department policy on Latin America, the Caribbean and international narcotics, said it was "unclear whether the initial plan was for this operation to be publicly announced in an interview by the president." Venezuela's dictatorial president, Nicolás Maduro, "was certain," [See Venezuela, A7]



CARLIN STIEHL Los Angeles Times

LAW ENFORCEMENT officers are now banned from wearing masks on duty.



DANIA MAXWELL Los Angeles Times

OIL PRODUCTION can ramp up, allowed by a law aimed at stabilizing gas prices.



JONATHAN ALCORN For The Times

GOV. GAVIN NEWSOM announces a plan to sell \$11 insulin pens through CalRx.

SWEEPING NEW LAWS FOR 2026

By Katie King and Phil Willon

SACRAMENTO — Gov. Gavin Newsom's office this week described 2025 as "the year that would not end." But it has, and in its aftermath comes a slew of new laws passed that year that will affect almost every Californian.

The governor signed nearly 800 bills last year, including legislation that caps the cost of insulin, streamlines California State University admissions and temporarily allows sexual assault claims that are past the statute of limitations. He also approved legislation banning law enforcement officers from wearing masks to hide their identities during operations — a law that's already being challenged in court by the Trump administration.

Some of the new state laws were passed years ago and are just now taking effect.

"These new laws reflect who we are: a state that protects workers, respects students, puts people before politics, and isn't afraid to hold powerful interests accountable," Newsom said in a

Tuesday statement.

Most of the laws listed below take effect on New Year's Day. As in years past, the list mostly reflects the interests of the Democrats who hold a supermajority in both the state Senate and Assembly and hold every statewide office in California, including the governorship.

Here are a few notable laws going into effect:

Health

Fertility treatments: Large employer health plans will be required to cover infertility treatments, including in vitro fertilization, for everyone, regardless of marital status, gender identity or sexual orientation. "California is a proud reproductive freedom state — and that includes increasing access to fertility services that help those who want to start a family," Newsom said after signing the bill in 2024. The governor later pushed to delay implementation of state Senate [See Laws, A8]

President pulls Guard out of L.A., other cities

Trump says troops can go with crime 'greatly reduced.' Newsom cites court rulings.

By MELODY GUTIERREZ AND JAMES QUEALLY

SACRAMENTO — President Trump said Wednesday that he is removing the National Guard from the Democrat-led cities of Los Angeles, Portland, Ore., and Chicago, following a Supreme Court ruling that cast doubt on the administration's legal theory for using the troops in domestic law enforcement operations.

The president, however, said the decision was based solely on what he described as "greatly reduced" crime in those cities and left open the possibility of future federal intervention.

Gov. Gavin Newsom's office countered Trump's reasoning for removing troops in Los Angeles, saying the decision was due to California's recent victories in court, including a ruling Wednesday returning control of the Guard to the state. "I'm glad President Trump has finally admitted

defeat: we've said all along the federalization of the National Guard in California is illegal," Newsom said in a statement.

The back-and-forth followed a brief filed with the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals on Tuesday in which Justice Department lawyers said they formally withdrew a request to keep the troops under federal control while the appeal proceeds. A subsequent order Wednesday from the appeals court returned control of the California National Guard to Newsom.

Last week, the U.S. Supreme Court handed Trump a temporary defeat, blocking him from deploying the National Guard in Chicago.

In their ruling, the justices said the power to deploy troops domestically is given to the president only in "exceptional" circumstances.

The decision was seen as a turning point in a contentious legal fight over Trump's use of state National Guard troops, which the president said was necessary to quell unrest over immigration enforcement. Justice Department lawyers [See Guard, A6]

Edison is ordered to assess idle lines

In aftermath of Eaton fire, regulators tell utility to identify risks of unused equipment.

By MELODY PETERSEN

State regulators have ordered Southern California Edison to identify fire risks on its unused transmission lines such as the century-old equipment suspected of igniting the devastating Eaton wildfire.

Edison also must tell regulators how its 355 miles of out-of-service transmission lines located in areas of high fire risk will be used in the future, according to a document issued by the Office of Energy Infrastructure Safety on Dec. 23.

State regulations require utilities to remove abandoned lines so they don't become a public hazard. Edison executives said they did not remove the Eaton Canyon line because they believed it would be used in the future. It last carried power in 1971.

The Office of Energy Infrastructure Safety said Edison must determine which unused transmission lines

are most at risk of igniting fires and create a plan to decrease that risk. In some cases that might mean removing the equipment entirely.

While the OEIS report focuses on Edison, the agency said it also will require the state's other electric companies to take similar actions with their idle transmission lines.

Scott Johnson, an Edison spokesman, said Monday that the company already had been reviewing idle lines and planned to respond to the regulators' requests. He said Edison often keeps idle lines in place "to support long-term system needs, such as future electrification, backup capacity or regional growth."

"If idle lines are identified to have no future use, they are removed," he said.

Johnson said that since 2018, Edison has removed idle lines that no longer had a purpose seven times and provided a list of those projects.

The investigation into the cause of the Eaton wildfire by state and local fire officials has not yet been released. Edison has said the leading theory is that the [See Electricity, A12]

Guard is pulled from Democrat-led cities

[Guard, from A1] had argued in court that once federalized, Guard troops could remain under the president's command indefinitely and that courts had no authority to review their deployment.

California officials filed their lawsuit in June after Trump mobilized nearly 2,000 National Guard troops to Los Angeles over Newsom's objections, arguing the deployment was "unlawful and unprecedented." Most troops were sent home in August.

Court records show roughly 300 California troops remained under federal control, including 100 who were still active in Los Angeles as of December.

Newsom said in September that Trump's decision to deploy troops to Los Angeles amounted to costly political theater that saddled taxpayers with a nearly \$120-million bill. That price tag was tallied from estimates provided by the California National Guard, Newsom's office said.

In mid-December, video reviewed by The Times showed dozens of troops under Trump's command quietly leaving the Roybal Federal Building downtown in the middle of the night following an appellate court's order to decamp. That facility had been patrolled by armed soldiers since June.

Also in December, a federal judge in the Northern District of California ruled that the president had illegally seized control of California's National Guard during protests over immigration enforcement. That order is now back in effect after the 9th Circuit's Wednesday order.

U.S. District Judge Charles R. Breyer rejected the administration's argument that once federalized, Guard units could remain under presidential control indefinitely. He warned that such a theory would upend



CARLIN STIEHL Los Angeles Times

THE CALIFORNIA National Guard holds a line in front of anti-ICE protesters outside the Federal Building in Los Angeles in June.

the constitutional balance between state and federal power.

The Los Angeles case is part of a broader, high-stakes legal battle over the president's authority to deploy armed forces inside U.S. cities. Similar disputes involving Guard deployments in Oregon and Illinois are moving through the courts, with several judges, including conservative appointees, expressing skepticism about claims that such decisions are beyond judicial review.

Members of Congress have also begun scrutinizing the deployments, raising

concerns about civil liberties and the growing use of military forces in civilian settings.

Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said earlier in the year that Los Angeles would have "burned down," if not for the National Guard deployment.

Trump's message on Wednesday on his social media platform Truth Social echoed those claims.

"Portland, Los Angeles, and Chicago were GONE if it weren't for the Federal Government stepping in," Trump wrote. "We will come back, perhaps in a much different and stronger form,

when crime begins to soar again - Only a question of time!"

But the Guardsmen were only stationed to protect federal buildings in downtown and West L.A. and rarely moved into city streets. Despite administration claims, violent crime and property crime fell about 8% in the city this year, LAPD records show.

Although the protests caused significant property damage in a small section of downtown L.A., federal prosecutors have struggled to get indictments against demonstrators accused of attacking federal agents.

In December, a Times review of alleged assaults on federal officers in a number of cities where Trump either dispatched the National Guard or threatened to — including L.A., Chicago and Portland — showed the majority of the incidents resulted in no injuries to officers.

California Atty. Gen. Rob Bonta celebrated Tuesday's filing with the appeals court, saying his office "worked nights and weekends to defend the Constitution and bring about an end of the President's unlawful overreach of executive power."

"For six months, California National Guard troops have been used as political pawns by a President desperate to be king," Bonta said in a statement.

"From the political display in MacArthur Park to their unlawful participation in indiscriminate immigration raids, the militaristic deployment of National Guard troops to Los Angeles streets has left lasting scars in Angeleno communities. There is a reason our founders decided military and civilian affairs must be kept separate; a reason that our military is, by design, apolitical."

Exercise advice from orthopedic surgeon

[Lopez, from A1] change, and a pacemaker that keeps on ticking.

But I decided to get some expert advice that might be useful for anyone who has entered this glorious phase of life in which it's possible to pull a muscle while taking a nap, or pinch a nerve in your neck while brushing your teeth.

And I knew just whom to call.

Cedars-Sinai orthopedic surgeon Robert Klapper hosts an ESPN radio show called "Weekend Warrior." This lab-coated Renaissance man, a surfer and sculptor in his spare time, also weighs in regularly on the radio with "Klapper Vision" — clear-eyed takes on all manner of twisted, pulled and broken body parts suffered by elite athletes and banged-up buzzards like me.

On "Weekend Warrior," Klapper might be talking about knee replacement surgery one minute, segue to Michelangelo's rendering of the human form, and then insist that a sandwich is not a sandwich without pepperoncini. It isn't necessarily all connected, but it doesn't matter.

When I emailed Klapper about my aches and pains, he responded immediately to say he's written one book on hips, another on knees and a third one is in the



GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

DR. ROBERT KLAPPER is pleased with the recovery of patient Kathleen Clark, 74, from knee surgery.

The other is abusive, and one of Klapper's examples is pickleball. With all its starts and stops, twists and turns, reaches and lunges, pickleball is busting the Medicare bank, with a few hundred million dollars' worth of

ping their ACL like they are in pickup basketball," Klapper said. "They're coming to me saying, 'My shoulder is killing me, my knee is killing me.'"

Pickleball has obvious conditioning benefits for

There's no fountain of youth, Klapper said, but the closest thing is a swimming pool.

OK, but I already swim three times a week.

Klapper had different ideas.

— when you close your eyes and straighten your elbow and bend your elbow, straighten your knee and bend your knee ... your brain knows where your limbs are in space."

This is called

Arizona ex-senator says he has dementia

BY SEJAL GOVINDARAO

PHOENIX — Republican former U.S. Sen. Jon Kyl of Arizona on Tuesday announced his withdrawal from public life after a dementia diagnosis.

Kyl, 83, represented Arizona in both chambers of Congress for nearly three decades. Most of those years were in the Senate, including a term as minority whip.

"My family and I now head down a path filled with moments of joy and increasing difficulties," Kyl said in a statement. "I am grateful beyond expression for their love and support, in these coming days as in all the days of my life. Despite this diagnosis, I remain a very fortunate man."

Kyl left the Senate in 2013 and joined a lobbying firm. In 2018 he was appointed by then-Gov. Doug Ducey, a fellow Republican, to fill the late Sen. John McCain's seat.

Kyl leveraged his expertise on water policy in Congress to gain approval of tribal water rights settle-

01/02/2026

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Los Angeles Times

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FRIDAY, JANUARY 2, 2026

latimes.com



KAYLA BARTKOWSKI Los Angeles Times



JASON ARMOND Los Angeles Times



RONALDO BOLANOS Los Angeles Times

CLOCKWISE from top left, Morgan State University's "Magnificent Marching Machine" band plays; crowds stay dry(ish); and performers join Kermit the Frog on the "Visit Mississippi" float at the 137th Rose Parade.

Even rainy skies can't damp excitement at Rose Parade

BY ITZEL LUNA, IRIS KWOK, CHRISTOPHER BUCHANAN AND HAILEY BRANSON-POTTS

As a steady rain pounded Colorado Boulevard in Pasadena before dawn Thursday, Michael Brooks hunched beneath a daisy-printed umbrella, guarding his family's front-row seats for the 137th Rose Parade.

The 41-year-old Monterey Park resident clasped a cup of hot chocolate. Despite the deluge, he smiled from his lawn chair.

It was his first time attending the Rose Parade in person, he said. Why wouldn't he be happy?

"I was not going to miss this opportunity," Brooks said. "I had to be right here, front row, for my mother-in-

law, for my wife, for my kids."

Cue the jokes about raining on everyone's parade, because this year's Rose Parade was the first wet one in two decades.

It was just the 11th rainy Rose Parade since the event — meant to show off Southern California's mild winters — began in 1890.

By 10 a.m. Thursday, just as the parade was wrapping up on the 5.5-mile route, the storm had dumped 1.21 inches of rain on eastern Pasadena over 12 hours, according to the National Weather Service in Oxnard. Downtown Los Angeles had received 1.33 inches.

Hardcore parade fans camped overnight along the route, huddling beneath awnings and raincoats as they rang in the new year. They included Tracy Tankersley, who welcomed 2026 by guarding 15 lawn chairs on Colorado Boulevard all night.

For her, the parade was essentially a family reunion. Tankersley drove from San Diego on Wednesday with her son and son-in-law to join her mother on the route. Her other son, his wife, and their five children came from Colorado.

Tankersley held out hope for dry skies, despite the

forecasts. When rain threatened in years past, the sun always came out just in time. This year, though, "it proved me wrong," she said.

When she and her family camp, they're usually surrounded by spectators packing the route, lying on mattresses, swapping stories around fire pits. This year, Tankersley spent the frigid night alone, dozing off briefly while the rest of her family snoozed in nearby vehicles.

She said it "was a different Rose," but still an experience to remember.

Once the floats started [See Rose Parade, A4]

It took pressure to reveal errors in Palisades fire

A year later, questions swirl about firefighting decisions — and about disclosures afterward.

BY PAUL PRINGLE AND ALENE TCHEKMEDYIAN

Pacific Palisades had been burning for less than two hours when word raced through the ranks of the Los Angeles Fire Department that the agency's leaders had failed to pre-deploy any extra engines and crews to the area, despite warnings of life-threatening winds.

In the days after the fire broke out, and as thousands of homes and businesses continued to go up in flames, then-Fire Chief Kristin Crowley said little about the lack of pre-deployment, which was first disclosed by The Times, instead blaming those high winds, along with a shortage of working engines and money, for her agency's failure to quickly knock down the blaze.

Crowley's comments did not stand up to scrutiny. To several former LAFD chief officers as well as to people who lost everything in the disaster, her focus on equipment and City Hall finances marked the beginning of an ongoing campaign of secrecy and deflection by the department — all designed to avoid taking full responsibility for what went wrong in the preparations for and response to the Jan. 7 fire, which killed 12 people and

leveled much of the Palisades and surrounding areas.

"I don't think they've acknowledged that they've made mistakes yet, and that's really a problem," said Sue Pascoe, editor of the local publication Circling the News, who lost her home of 30 years. "They're still trying to cover up. ... It's not the regular firefighters. It's coming from higher up."

With the first anniversary of the fire a week away, questions about firefighting missteps remained largely unanswered by the LAFD and Mayor Karen Bass. Among them: Why were crews ordered to leave the still-smoldering scar of an earlier blaze that would reignite into the Palisades inferno? Why did the LAFD alter its after-action report on the fire in a way that appeared intended to shield it from criticism?

The city also has yet to release the mayor's communications about the after-action report. The Times requested the communications in November, and the report — which was meant to pinpoint failures and enumerate lessons learned, to avoid repeating mistakes — was issued in early October. Nor has the city fulfilled a records request from The Times about the whereabouts of fire engines in the Palisades when the first 911 call came in. It took the first crews about 20 minutes to reach the scene, by which time the fierce winds were [See Fire, A8]

Immigration raids linked to job losses

A UC Merced study used census data to track private-sector changes over months.

BY SUHAUNA HUSSAIN

Each month, Edward Flores crunches the numbers. And each month he grows more and more certain of the stark effect of federal immigration raids on California's economy.

Flores found that the number of people reporting private-sector employment in California in late May and early June fell by 3.1% — a drop so significant it was exceeded in recent memory only by the employment downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

The associate professor of sociology and faculty director of the UC Merced labor center based his analysis on U.S. census data from those months and published his findings over the summer.

Flores has repeated the

analysis for each month since June, with the exception of October, when the federal government shut down and for the first time in some 50 years did not collect the data.

The decline in employment grew, with a 4.9% decrease in the first week of July — 742,492 fewer workers.

Numbers somewhat bounced back in August, after a U.S. district judge temporarily banned roving patrols of immigration agents from stopping people based on the color of their skin, language spoken or vocation. But from May to September, private-sector employment fell by 2.9%, Flores said in his latest report.

"We are seeing a pretty persistent trend," Flores said. "It really underscores the urgency with which our elected officials and policymakers should be devising ways of mitigating the economic harm that is occurring as a result of immigration enforcement actions."

The analysis shows an outsized effect on noncitizen [See Raids, A11]

SWEEPSTAKES AWARD: A float built by Cal Poly students takes top honors in the 137th Rose Parade. A5



JEAN-CHRISTOPHE BOTT Keystone

SWISS police gather outside the site of the blaze.

Dozens killed in fire

Suit alleges abuse of female inmates at L.A. County jail

Women at Lynwood lockup say male deputies grope them, watch them shower.

BY CONNOR SHEETS

A federal lawsuit filed on

in late October, said in an interview that dozens of inmates shared "chilling" allegations of "brazen" sexual abuse and harassment.

"It seemed to be happening with such frequency that it was like a practice. ... This is something that has been accepted," he said. "It's heartbreaking for me to hear



BRIAN VAN DER BRUG Los Angeles Times

A PLUME of smoke from the Palisades fire over a ridge in Pacific Palisades on Jan. 7. The weather service had sounded the alarm about critical fire weather for days.

Facts of Palisades fire slow to emerge

[Fire, from A1]

driving the flames toward homes.

A Bass spokesperson has said that the mayor did not demand changes to the after-action report, noting that she pushed for its creation and that it was written and edited by the LAFD.

"This administration is only interested in the full truth about what happened before, during, and after the fire," the spokesperson, Clara Karger, said last month.

The LAFD has stopped granting interviews or answering questions from The Times about the matter, vaguely citing federal court proceedings. David Loy, legal director of the First Amendment Coalition, said that the federal prosecution of a man accused of starting the earlier blaze does not preclude the department from discussing its actions surrounding both fires.

In a December television interview, Fire Chief Jaime Moore acknowledged that some residents don't trust his agency and said his mandate from Bass was to "help guide and rebuild the Los Angeles Fire Department to the credibility that we've always had."

The Lachman fire

Shortly after midnight on Jan. 1, 2025, a man watched flames spread in the distant hills and called 911.

"Very top of Lachman, is where we are," he told the dispatcher. "It's pretty small, but it's still at the very top and it's growing."

"Help is on the way," the dispatcher said.

A few hours later, at 4:46 a.m., the LAFD announced that the blaze, which later became known as the Lachman fire, was fully contained at eight acres.

Top fire commanders soon made plans to finish mopping up the scene and to leave with their equipment, according to text messages obtained by The Times through a state Public Records Act request.

"I imagine it might take all day to get that hose off the hill," LAFD Chief Deputy Phillip Fligiel said in a group chat. "Make sure that plan is coordinated."

Firefighters who returned the next day complained to Battalion Chief Mario Garcia that the ground was still smoldering and



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

MAYOR Karen Bass, left, listens as then-Fire Chief Kristin Crowley addresses the media Jan. 11. LAFD hadn't pre-deployed additional fire engines and crews to the Palisades for the windstorm.

wraps the complaints of the firefighters who were ordered to leave the burn site. The Times disclosed them in a story in late October. In June, LAFD Battalion Chief Nick Ferrari had told a high-ranking fire official who works for a different agency in the L.A. region that LAFD officials knew about the firefighters' complaints. The Times also reported.

Bass has directed Moore, an LAFD veteran who took charge of the department in November, to commission an "independent" investigation of the Lachman fire mop-up. The after-action report contained only a brief mention of the earlier fire.

No pre-deployment

to attack a major blaze.

None of that happened in the Palisades, with its hilly terrain covered in bone-dry brush, even though the weather service had flagged it as one of the regions at "extreme risk."

Without pre-deployment, just 18 firefighters are typically on duty in the Palisades.

LAFD commanders decided to staff only five of the more than 40 engines available to supplement the regular firefighting force city-wide. Because they didn't hold over the outgoing shift, they staffed the extra engines with firefighters who volunteered for the job — only enough to operate three of the five engines.

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"Thank you for all your hard work," Villanueva responded. "I'll let you know how we're going to move forward."

Over the next two months, the report went through a series of edits — behind closed doors and without Cook's involvement. The revised report was released publicly on Oct. 8.

That same day, Cook emailed Villanueva, declining to endorse the public version because of changes that altered his findings and made the report "highly unprofessional and inconsistent with our established standards."

"Having reviewed the revised version submitted by your office, I must respectfully decline to endorse it in its current form," Cook wrote in the email obtained by The Times. "The document has undergone substantial modifications and contains significant deletions of information that, in some instances, alter the conclusions originally presented."

Cook's version highlighted the failure to recall the outgoing shift and fully pre-deploy as a major mistake, noting that it was an attempt to be "fiscally responsible" that went against the department's policy and procedures.

The department's final report stated that the pre-deployment measures for the Palisades and other fire-prone locations went "above and beyond" the LAFD's standard practice. The Times analyzed seven drafts of the report obtained through a records request and disclosed the significant deletions and revisions.

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Firefighters who returned the next day complained to Battalion Chief Mario Garcia that the ground was still smoldering and rocks still felt hot to the touch, according to private text messages from three firefighters to a third party that were reviewed by The Times. But Garcia ordered them to roll up their hoses and leave.

At 1:35 p.m., Garcia texted Fligel and Chief Deputy Joseph Everett: "All hose and equipment has been picked up."

Five days after that, on the morning of Jan. 7, an LAFD captain called Fire Station 23 with an urgent message: The Lachman fire had started up again.

LAFD officials were emphatic early on that the Lachman fire was fully extinguished. But both inside and outside the department, many were certain it had rekindled.

"We won't leave a fire that has any hot spots," Crowley said at a community meeting in mid-January.

"That fire was dead out," Everett said at the same meeting, adding that he was out of town but communicating with the incident commander. "If it is determined that was the cause, it would be a phenomenon."

The department kept under



ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

MAYOR Karen Bass, left, listens as then-Fire Chief Kristin Crowley addresses the media Jan. 11. LAFD hadn't pre-deployed additional fire engines and crews to the Palisades for the windstorm.

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No pre-deployment

The afternoon before hazardous weather is expected, LAFD officials are typically briefed by the National Weather Service, using that information to decide where to position firefighters and engines the following morning.

The weather service had been sounding the alarm about critical fire weather for days. "HEADS UP!!!" NWS Los Angeles posted on X the morning of Jan. 6. "A LIFE-THREATENING, DESTRUCTIVE" windstorm was coming.

It hadn't rained much in months, and wind gusts were expected to reach 80 mph. The so-called burning index — a measure of the wildfire threat — was off the charts. Anything beyond 162 is considered "extreme," and the figure for that Tuesday was 268.

In the past, the LAFD readied for powerful windstorms by pre-deploying large numbers of engines and crews to the areas most at risk for wildfires and, in some cases, requiring a previous shift of hundreds of firefighters to stay for a second shift — incurring large overtime costs — to ensure there were enough personnel positioned

to attack a major blaze.

None of that happened in the Palisades, with its hilly terrain covered in bone-dry brush, even though the weather service had flagged it as one of the regions at "extreme risk."

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On Jan. 6, officials decided to pre-deploy just nine engines to high-risk areas, adding eight more the following morning. None of them was sent to the Palisades.

The Times learned from sources of the decision to forgo a pre-deployment operation in the Palisades. LAFD officials were mum about the inadequate staffing until after The Times obtained internal records from a source in January that described the department's pre-deployment rollout.

The officials then defended their actions in interviews. Bass cited the LAFD's failure to hold over the previous shift of firefighters as a reason she removed Crowley as chief less than two months after the fire.

The after-action report

In March, a working group was formed inside the LAFD to prepare the Palisades fire after-action report. A fire captain who was recommended for the group sought to make sure its members would have the freedom to follow the facts wherever they led, according to internal emails the city released in re-

sponse to a records request by an unidentified party.

"I am concerned about interference from outside entities that may attempt to influence the direction our report takes," Capt. Harold Kim wrote to Battalion Chief Kenneth Cook, who was leading the review. "I would like to ensure that the report that we painstakingly generate be published as is, to as reasonable an extent as possible."

He worried about revisions, saying that once LAFD labor unions and others "are done with many publications, they become unrecognizable to the authors."

Cook, who had been involved with review teams for more than a decade and written numerous reports, replied: "I can assure you that I have never allowed for any of our documents to be altered in any way by the organization."

Other emails suggest that Kim ultimately remained in the group.

As the report got closer to completion, LAFD officials, worried about how it would be received, privately formed a second group for "crisis management" — a decision that surfaced through internal emails released through another records request by an unidentified party.

"The primary goal of this workgroup is to collaboratively manage communications for any critical public relations issue that may arise. The immediate and most pressing crisis is the Palisades After Action Report," LAFD Assistant Chief Kairi Brown wrote in an email to eight others, including interim Fire Chief Ronnie Villanueva.

"With significant interest from media, politicians, and the community, it is crucial that we present a unified response to anticipated questions and concerns," Brown wrote. "By doing so, we can ensure

our messaging is clear and consistent, allowing us to create our own narrative rather than reactive responses."

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Cook's email withdrawing his endorsement of the report was not included in the city's response to one of the records requests filed by an unknown party in October. Nearly 180 of Cook's emails were posted on the city's records portal on Dec. 9, but the one that expressed his concerns about the report was missing. That email was posted on the portal, which allows the public to view documents provided in response to records requests, after The Times asked about it.

The LAFD did not respond to a query about why the email was not released with Cook's other emails. Karger, the Bass spokesperson, said the link to the document was broken and the city fixed it after learning the email wasn't posted correctly. The Times has inquired about how and why the link didn't work.

Former LAFD Assistant Chief Patrick Butler, who worked for the agency for 32 years and now heads the Redondo Beach Fire Department, said the city's silence on such inquiries is tantamount to deceiving the public.

"When deception is normalized within a public agency," he said, "it also normalizes operational failure and puts people at risk."

Pringle is a former Times staff writer.

CALIFORNIA

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DEBRIS remains at Palisades Bowl Mobile Home Estates on Wednesday, nearly a year after the Palisades fire. MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times

Cleanup notice issued for mobile home park

After months of waiting, displaced Palisades Bowl residents are told just before Christmas Eve that debris removal could start within days

BY NOAH HAGGERTY

Former residents of the Palisades Bowl Mobile Home Estates, a roughly 170-unit mobile home park completely destroyed in the Palisades fire, received a notice Dec. 23 from park owners saying debris removal would start as early as Friday.

The Bowl is the largest of a handful of properties in the Palisades still littered

with debris nearly a year after the fire. It's left the Bowl's former residents, who described the park as a "slice of paradise," stuck in limbo.

The email notice, which was reviewed by The Times, instructed residents to remove any burnt cars from their lots as quickly as possible, since contractors cannot dispose of vehicles without possessing the title. It followed months of near silence from the owners.

"The day before Christmas Eve ... it triggers everybody and throws everybody upside down," said Jon Brown, who lived in the Bowl for 10 years and now helps lead the fight for the residents' right to return home. "Am I liable if I can't get this done right now? Between Christmas and New Year's? It's just the most obnoxious, disgusting behavior."

Brown is not optimistic the owners will follow

through. "They've said things like this before over the years with a bunch of different things," he said, "and then they find some reason not to do it."

Last year, the Federal Emergency Management Agency denied requests from the city and the Bowl's owners to include the park in the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers cleanup program, which FEMA said was fo-

[See Debris, B2]

Hikers warn of wintry dangers on Mt. Baldy

The discovery of 3 bodies this week shows how deadly the landmark can become.

BY ALEX WIGGLESWORTH AND ITZEL LUNA

Officials have identified one of the three hikers found dead on Mt. Baldy this week as 19-year-old Marcus Muench Casanova of Seal Beach.

Casanova fell 500 feet on Monday while hiking Devil's Backbone, a sharp ridge with steep drops on either side, according to the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Department.

Two other hikers were then spotted on the mountainside by a helicopter sent to rescue Casanova, but crews were unable to conduct the operation due to high winds, officials said. An airship later lowered a medic, who found that all three men had died. A sheriff's air rescue team recovered the bodies about 2 p.m. the following afternoon.

The identities of the two other men have not been released. Investigators said they were not hiking with Casanova, and it's unclear when they died, how long they were on the mountain or whether they were reported missing before the discovery.

Casanova was a part-time seasonal employee with the Long Beach Department of Parks, Recre-

ation and Marine and had worked as a sailing instructor at the Leeway Sailing and Aquatics Center since 2023, the city said in a statement.

"Marcus had a rare gift of connecting with everyone he met, making summers and weekends brighter for sailing program participants and his fellow colleagues," the statement said.

The hikers' deaths have reverberated through the Southern California hiking community, where outdoors enthusiasts found themselves explaining, in online forums and to reporters in phone interviews, the dual nature of conditions on Mt. Baldy as observers speculate about what could have happened to each of the hikers.

Officials have not provided any details on what they think caused Casanova to fall or how the other two bodies ended up in the area.

In general terms, the climb to the top of Mt. Baldy is considered an entry-level mountaineering experience during warmer weather but dangerous during the winter, said Kyle Fordham, a 36-year-old hiker from Lakewood who has summited the highest peak in Southern California's San Gabriel Mountains at least 10 times — twice in snowy conditions.

The mountain's proximity to Los Angeles, coupled with social media content promoting the hike, encourages inexperienced adventurers, Fordham said, with

[See Mt. Baldy, B5]

State's wildlife chief taking new trail after 15 years

BY LILA SEIDMAN

Charlton "Chuck" Bonham has stepped down as director of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife after contending with a slew of contentious issues during his long tenure, including the resurgence of wolves and plummeting salmon populations.

Starting Jan. 26, Bonham will become the California executive director of the Nature Conservancy, one of the country's major environmental nonprofits.

"After 15 years, I just felt like I gave all I could to public service, and it was just the time for change," Bonham said at a California Fish and Game Commission meeting last month.

Initially appointed by former Gov. Jerry Brown in 2011, Bonham is the longest-serving director of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

Bonham said. Being the state's top wildlife manager entails balancing the conservation of animals with the needs of people, including public safety and economic pursuits. A decision that delights animal welfare advocates can anger industry stakeholders (and vice versa).

Take wolves. The year Bonham took the reins of the agency, the first gray wolf the state had hosted in nearly a century wandered in from Oregon. Wolves have since recolonized California — a development hailed by conservationists as an ecological win but bemoaned by many ranchers whose cattle are slaughtered by the skilled pack hunters.

Recently, the Department of Fish and Wildlife made what Bonham described as a "gut-wrenching decision" to euthanize sev-

New Year's Day downpour brings flooding, water rescues on roads

BY JEANETTE MARANTOS AND IRIS KWOK

A rare Jan. 1 rainstorm drenched Southern California, triggering slides and major road closures across the Los Angeles area, as well as swift water rescues on San Diego roadways.

Flooding of the 5 Freeway in the San Fernando Valley prompted Caltrans to shut down all lanes between Tuxford Street and Lankershim Boulevard for several hours, while a mudslide closed Big Tujunga Canyon Road in Angeles National Forest between the Angeles Forest Highway and Vogel Flat



CITY & STATE

ESSENTIAL CALIFORNIA

A look back on happenings of 2025

BY JUNE HSU

If 2025 feels like a blur of headlines, disasters and scandals, don't fret, we all feel this way. To help you sort and recall all of the big stories of the year, we have constructed a quick timeline of 2025. And, no, it wasn't all bad news.

January

On Tuesday, Jan. 7, fires broke out in Pacific Palisades and Altadena that would go on to kill 31 and destroy more than 16,000 structures, among the worst in California's history. The Palisades and Eaton fires devastated Southern California but work continues on the rebuilding effort.

More on the fires

■ Fire hydrants ran dry and a Palisades reservoir was offline and empty as the fires spread.

■ The fires were declared 100% contained at the end of the month. Los Angeles began to recover and rebuild.

Also in January, Donald Trump was inaugurated as the 47th president of the United States.

February

As Trump settled into the presidency, he immediately began pushing controversial policies, including ending birthright citizenship, ordering K-12 schools and colleges to eliminate diversity, equity and inclusion policies and beginning a mass layoff of government employees.

What else happened

■ The Trump administration backtracked on a plan to eliminate thousands of employees at the National Park Service after public outcry.

■ Thousands rallied in downtown Los Angeles and shut down the 101 Freeway to protest the new immigration policies. Several days



ANDREW GRINSFELDER waters down the roof of his mother's Pacific Palisades home on Jan. 8, hoping to hold off the Palisades fire.

GENARO MOLINA Los Angeles Times

late-night talk show returning later that month after a backlash.

What else happened

■ The decomposing body of Celeste Rivas, a SoCal teenager who went missing in 2024, was found in singer D4vd's Tesla.

For more award glory, readers followed the 77th Emmy Awards, which saw an 8% increase in ratings from last year.

October

What else happened

■ California passed Prop. 50, a redistricting ballot measure touted by Newsom to help Democrats. State Republicans soon after sued to block the measure.

December

And lastly, the killings of Rob Reiner and his wife, Michele Singer Reiner, dominated headlines in December. Nick Reiner, the couple's son, was arrested



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love is...



...making my heart flutter.

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JUMBLE

Unscramble these Jumbles, one letter to each square, to form four ordinary words.

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AHVEL

HAOSWD

BEMIRL

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Answer "here:"

Yesterday's Jumbles: LINEN GLADE SWITCH PONCHO
Answer: The professor had teaching chemistry — DOWN TO A SCIENCE

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The name and address of the court is:

(El nombre y dirección de la corte es):
VAN NUYS COURTHOUSE EAST
6230 SYLMAR AVENUE
VAN NUYS, CA 91401

The name, address, and telephone number of the plaintiff's attorney, or plaintiff without an attorney, is:

(El nombre, la dirección y el número de teléfono del abogado del demandante, o del demandante que no tiene abogado, es):
Eran Lagstein, Esq.
LAGSTEIN LAW FIRM, P.C., 1801 Century Park East,
24th Fl, Los Angeles, CA 90067, 323-330-0507

Date: 06/30/2025

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Los Angeles Times

in estranged wife's death

BY SUSANNE RUST AND
ALEX WIGGLESWORTH

A prominent Imperial Valley farmer charged with killing his estranged wife was extradited to Arizona on Tuesday, where bail has been set at \$5.5 million.

Michael Abatti, 63, was arrested on Dec. 23 in the killing of Kerri Ann Abatti, 59.

He pleaded not guilty to a charge of first-degree murder on Wednesday in Navajo County Superior Court.

Once bail is posted, Abatti will be allowed to return to El Centro — where he lives and where he can receive ongoing medical treatments, according to his attorneys, Owen Roth and Danielle Iredale.

He is required to surrender his passport and will be allowed limited travel to Arizona and Wyoming, where the Abattis own property.

Kerri Abatti was shot in

her home in the Arizona town of Pinetop-Lakeside around 9 p.m. on Nov. 20, authorities say.

An autopsy report shows she was shot once in the head. The shot came from outside her house and went through a window.

Her nephew found her after hearing a loud bang, and called 911, according to autopsy reports. She died while being taken to a hospital in Show Low, which is roughly 10 miles from Pinetop-Lakeside.

According to the couple's divorce filings, the Abattis had been embroiled in a bitter feud about the amount of financial spousal support Kerri Abatti was owed after the separation.

Kerri Abatti left her husband and their El Centro home in August 2023 after 31 years of marriage.

While he was on a fishing trip, she left for Pinetop-Lakeside, where the couple owned a 7,000-square-foot

home on a 14-acre lot.

Kerri Abatti grew up in Pinetop-Lakeside; it is where her parents, siblings and extended family reside.

The couple have three adult children who live in California and Nevada.

Photos of Michael Abatti taken Wednesday in Navajo County show him shirtless and wearing a suicide vest.

His attorneys told The Times on Monday that he had surrendered to authorities in El Centro when he learned of the arrest warrant.

At a news conference on Monday, Navajo County Sheriff David Clouse told reporters his detectives "had strong reason to believe that Mr. Abatti had traveled from El Centro, Calif., on Nov. 20 to Pinetop, Ariz., committed the homicide and traveled back to California."

A pretrial conference and release hearing is scheduled for March 17 in Navajo County.

Mobile home park fire cleanup

[Debris, from B1]

cused on residential lots, not commercial properties. In a letter, FEMA argued it could not trust the owners of the Bowl to preserve the beachfront property as affordable housing.

The Bowl, which began as a Methodist camp in the 1890s, was purchased by Edward Biggs, a Northern California real estate mogul, in 2005 and split between his first and second wives after his death in 2021. The family has a history of failing to perform routine maintenance and seeking to redevelop the park into a more lucrative resort community.

After FEMA's rejection, the owners failed to meet the city of L.A.'s debris removal deadlines. In October, the city's Board of Building and Safety Commissioners declared the park a public nuisance alongside seven other properties, giving the city the authority to complete the debris removal itself and charge the owners the bill.

But the city has yet to find funds to front the work, which is expected to cost

millions.

On Dec. 10, City Councilmember Traci Park filed a motion that would order the city to come up with a cost estimate for debris removal and identify funding sources within the city. It would also instruct the city attorney's office to explore using criminal prosecution to address the uncleared properties.

The Department of Building and Safety did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Despite the recent movement on debris removal, residents of the Palisades Bowl still have a long road ahead.

In mobile home parks, tenants lease their spaces from the landowners but own the homes placed on the land. Before residents can start rebuilding, the Bowl's owners need to replace or repair the foundations for the homes; fix any damage to the roads, utilities and retaining walls; and rebuild facilities such as the community center and pool.

The owners have not responded to multiple re-

quests for comment, but in February, Colby Biggs, Edward Biggs' grandson, told CalMatters that "if we have to go invest \$100 million to rebuild the park and we're not able to recoup that in some fashion, then it's not likely we will rebuild the park."

Mobile home law experts and many residents doubt that the Biggs family would be able to convert the rent-controlled mobile home park into something else under existing law. The most realistic option, should the Biggs family decide against rebuilding, would be to sell the park to another owner — or directly to the residents, a course of action the residents have been actively pursuing.

The lack of communication and action from the owners has nonetheless left the Bowl's eclectic former community of artists, teachers, surfers, first responders and retirees in limbo.

Many are running out of insurance money for temporary housing and remain unsure whether they'll ever be able to move back.

Law expands divorce option

[Divorce, from B1]
Superior Court.

What's different under the new law

Before SB 1427, a joint petition was permitted for couples who were married less than five years; had one spouse living in California for at least six months and in the county of the filing for at least three months; were not expecting a baby; did not own real estate; had no debts exceeding \$7,000; and had community property valued at less than \$57,000, not including cars.

The law also applied to same-sex couples who married in California but were not residents.

The new law allows parties who do not meet these requirements to file a petition for dissolution or legal separation, as long as they meet certain requirements.

The major change in the

previous limitations is that a couple seeking to separate who have children can now file the joint petition.

The new law also requires the couple to agree on the terms of their separation, including property, support and child-related matters.

Those who choose the option must provide the following information:

■ The number of children born during the marriage, their ages and dates of birth.

■ A list of issues that the parties intend to resolve by agreement, including legal grounds for dissolution or separation, date of separation, child custody, child support, spousal support, separate property, community and quasi-community property, restoration of former names, and attorney's fees and costs.

U.S. divorce rates are on the decline

Though there's been a

slight uptick for those over 50, divorce has been in decline nationwide since the early 1980s, according to the Pew Research Center. About a third of Americans who have ever been married are divorced.

California's divorce rate is lower than the national average.

In 2023, nearly 75 of every 1,000 Californians were divorced — a rate of about 7.45%, according to the American Society for the Positive Care of Children, a nonprofit.

Pew found that adults with higher educations are more likely to get married in the first place and less likely to divorce. Others are opting for cohabitation or staying single.

Ann Gold Buscho, a licensed clinical psychologist, says there are seven top reasons why people choose not to divorce. Among them is not being able to afford it.

to the stalls, the complaint states, male guards allegedly “intentionally press their crotches against the handcuffed hands of the female inmates ... and intentionally fondle the inmates’ hips, buttocks, and bodies in a sexual manner.”

Deputies “routinely and intentionally set the water temperature at a scalding or near-scalding level,” the complaint adds, “which forces the female inmates taking showers to move hurriedly and squirm erratically” and “often results in the female inmates’ breasts jiggling and wiggling demonstrably in full view of the male correctional officers in the adjacent ‘cop shop.’”

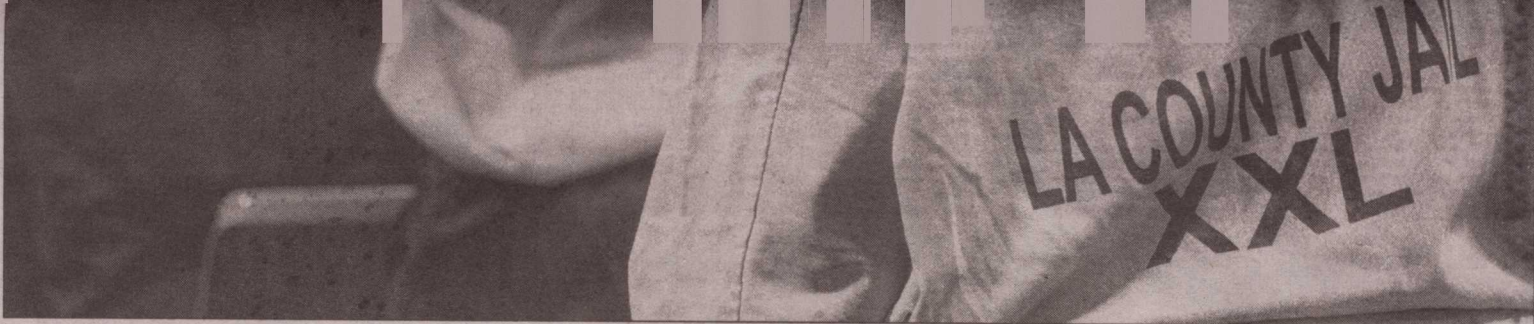
The Sheriff’s Department said in a statement that “[t]here is an ongoing inquiry into the claims” and that it “maintains a zero-tolerance policy towards any form of sexual abuse or harassment within its facilities.”

The statement added that it “takes all allegations of sexual misconduct, abuse of authority, and violations of Department policy extremely seriously.”

The Sybil Brand Commission, the independent oversight body for L.A. County’s jails, has documented similar complaints from female inmates in recent months.

The commission, which performs inspections on unannounced visits to the jails, said in an October report that multiple inmates “allege a deputy observes women showering from the lower level, escorts women while leaving them exposed in shower, and makes them wait unclothed before returning to their cells. Fear of retaliation deters reporting.”

Commission Chair Haley



MYUNG J. CHUN Los Angeles Times

A LAWSUIT CLAIMS deputies sexually harassed 38 women at a Lynwood jail. An independent watchdog has noted similar complaints.

Broder described the inmates as “some of the most vulnerable women on earth. They can’t do anything; they’re locked in cells and being retaliated against if they report it.”

Defendants in the federal lawsuit include L.A. County, Sheriff Robert Luna and three of his predecessors, and a dozen jail staffers.

The Sheriff’s Department said in a statement that two deputies named in the lawsuit “are actively working,” with one now at Men’s Central Jail and another still in Lynwood.

One of the two men previously worked as the Prison Rape Elimination Act compliance manager at the women’s jail, according to the complaint.

In November, The Times reported that out of 592 inmate claims of sexual abuse or harassment by deputies filed since 2021, none were deemed “substantiated” by Sheriff’s Department investigators.

Over that period, according to a review of district attorney’s office records by The Times, the Sheriff’s Department referred none of those cases to L.A. County prosecutors, who decide whether there is enough evidence to file charges.

“The DA’s office has brought no cases against

sheriff’s deputies for sexual assault crimes committed against inmates” since 2021, the office confirmed in an email. It added that it is “not aware of any such cases recently presented by LASD for filing consideration involving deputies accused of sexually assaulting inmates.”

The Sheriff’s Department said in a statement that since 2021 it has sent nine cases for review by either its Internal Affairs or Internal Criminal Investigation bureaus, all of which “are still being actively investigated.” It added that “[o]nce a criminal investigation is completed, investigators will present the case to the District Attorney’s Office for filing consideration.”

The department has acted against at least one deputy in response to an inmate’s claims of sexual misconduct in recent years. In November 2023, Deputy Jonathan Tejada Paredes was arrested on suspicion of sexually assaulting an inmate while he was working in the women’s jail in Lynwood.

But court records show that no county or federal charges have been filed against Tejada Paredes. The district attorney’s office said it “has not received this matter for charging consideration.”

Jacqueline Sparagna, an attorney for Tejada Paredes, denied wrongdoing by her client and confirmed that he has not been charged. She added that while the government goes out of its way to thoroughly investigate allegations against law enforcement officers, “there are likely problems with the” Paredes case, such as a lack of corroborating evidence or credibility questions.

Asked about the status of the claim against Tejada Paredes, the Sheriff’s Department said an “investigation is currently ongoing.”

In the past, the Sheriff’s Department has referred a number of cases of deputies accused by inmates of sexual assault for prosecution. For instance, Giancarlo Scotti, who worked at the Lynwood women’s jail, was charged by the district attorney’s office in 2018 with assaulting six inmates there after being arrested and placed on administrative leave by the Sheriff’s Department the prior year while the department investigated the allegations.

In 2019, court records show Scotti pleaded no contest to six counts of sexual activity with an inmate, ward or parolee. A judge sentenced him to two years in state custody, with a recommendation that his term be

served in a state fire camp.

A review of county records shows that the Sheriff’s Department has referred a number of deputies for prosecution on sexual abuse charges since 2021 — just not in cases with inmates as alleged victims.

In 2024, according to a district attorney’s office memo, prosecutors declined to bring criminal charges against a correctional officer after a Sheriff’s Department investigation found he had allegedly committed sexual battery against a female colleague at Twin Towers Correctional Facility in 2022. The memo cited questions about whether the deputy’s conduct constituted sexual battery, the accuser’s response and whether there was enough evidence to corroborate her claims.

The lack of transparency around how jail sexual abuse claims are investigated has raised alarms among local watchdogs.

“The public is not getting the truth from the Sheriff’s Department. We deserve real, accurate data about people being raped or assaulted in our jails, not hogwash,” said Hans Johnson, chair of the Los Angeles County Sheriff Civilian Oversight Commission.

Max Huntsman, who retired last month as L.A.

County inspector general, told The Times in November that he believes the Sheriff’s Department is “not in compliance with PREA in many senses,” including its internal policies and the physical state of its aging jails.

An April report by Huntsman’s office “found that many allegations remain unresolved in quarterly reports, raising concerns about the thoroughness of investigations” under the federal law.

Some investigations, the inspector general’s office wrote, did not include “a thorough description of physical and testimonial evidence,” and investigators “did not appear to interview all potential involved persons” in some cases.

The cross-gender viewing allegations at the Lynwood women’s jail are “one of many times when the county could have avoided litigation by simply correcting conditions,” Huntsman said.

As of Oct. 27, 30 of the 38 women who signed on to the lawsuit alleging rampant cross-gender viewing at the Lynwood jail remained incarcerated there.

“Behind every one of those paragraphs in that complaint is a human story,” said Dunn, the lawyer representing the inmates.

Trump ‘most culpable’ in Capitol riot, Smith testified

By ERIC TUCKER

WASHINGTON — The Jan. 6, 2021, riot at the U.S. Capitol “does not happen” without Donald Trump, former special counsel Jack Smith told lawmakers in characterizing the Republican president as the “most culpable and most responsible person” in the criminal conspiracy to overturn the results of the 2020 election.

The Republican-led House Judiciary Committee on Wednesday released a transcript and video of a closed-door December interview Smith gave about two investigations of Trump. The document shows how Smith, during a daylong deposition, defended the basis for pursuing indictments against Trump and vigorously rejected Republican suggestions that his investigations were politically motivated.

“The evidence here made clear that President Trump was by a large measure the most culpable and most responsible person in this conspiracy. These crimes were committed for his benefit. The attack that happened at the Capitol, part of this case, does not happen without him. The other co-conspirators were doing this for his benefit,” Smith said, bristling at a question about whether his investigations were meant to prevent Trump from reclaiming the presidency in 2024.

“So in terms of why we would pursue a case against him, I entirely disagree with any characterization that our work was in any way meant to hamper him in the presidential election,” he added.

The Dec. 17 deposition was conducted privately despite Smith’s request to tes-



ERIC LEE Bloomberg

REPUBLICANS HAVE suggested that Jack Smith’s inquiries into the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection were political.

tify publicly. The release of the transcript and video of the interview, so far Smith’s only appearance on Capitol Hill since leaving his special counsel position last January, adds to the public understanding of the decision-making behind two of the most consequential Justice Department investigations in recent history.

Trump was indicted on charges of conspiring to undo the 2020 election he lost to Democrat Joe Biden, and of willfully retaining classified documents at his Mar-a-Lago estate in Florida. Both cases were abandoned after Trump’s 2024 election win, with Smith citing Justice Department policy against the indictment of

a sitting president.

Smith repeatedly made clear his belief that the evidence gathered against Trump was strong enough to sustain a conviction. Part of the strength of the Jan. 6 case, Smith said, was the extent to which it relied on the testimony of Trump allies and supporters who cooperated with the investigation.

“We had an elector in Pennsylvania who is a former congressman, who was going to be an elector for President Trump, who said that what they were trying to do was an attempt to overthrow the government and illegal,” Smith said. “Our case was built on, frankly, Republicans who put their allegiance to the country be-

fore the party.”

Accounts from Republicans willing to stand up against the falsehood that the election had been stolen “even though it could mean trouble for them” created what Smith described as the “most powerful” evidence against Trump.

When it came to the Capitol riot itself, Smith said, the evidence showed that Trump “caused it and that he exploited it and that it was foreseeable to him.”

Asked whether there was evidence that Trump had instructed supporters to riot at the Capitol, Smith said that Trump in the weeks leading to the insurrection got “people to believe fraud claims that weren’t true.”

“He made false statements to state legislatures, to his supporters in all sorts of contexts and was aware in the days leading up to Jan. 6th that his supporters were angry when he invited them and then he directed them to the Capitol,” Smith said.

“Now, once they were at the Capitol and once the attack on the Capitol happened, he refused to stop it. He instead issued a tweet that without question in my mind endangered the life of his own vice president,” he added. “And when the violence was going on, he had to be pushed repeatedly by his staff members to do anything to quell it.”

Some of the deposition focused on Republican

anger at revelations that the Smith team had obtained, and analyzed, phone records of GOP lawmakers who were in contact with Trump on Jan. 6. Smith defended the maneuver as lawful and by the book, and suggested that outrage over the tactic should be directed at Trump — not prosecutors.

“Well, I think who should be accountable for this is Donald Trump. These records are people, in the case of the senators, Donald Trump directed his co-conspirators to call these people to further delay the proceedings. He chose to do that,” Smith said. “If Donald Trump had chosen to call a number of Democratic senators, we would have gotten toll records for Democratic senators.”

The communications between Trump and Republican supporters in Congress were an important component of the case, Smith said. He cited an interview his office did with Mark Meadows in which Trump’s former chief of staff referenced that Rep. Jim Jordan, an Ohio Republican and current chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, had been in touch with the White House on the afternoon of the riot.

“And what I recall was Meadows stating that ‘I’ve never seen Jim Jordan scared of anything,’ and the fact that we were in this different situation now where people were scared really made it clear that what was going on at the Capitol could not be mistaken for anything other than what it was,” Smith said.

Tucker writes for the Associated Press. AP writer Alanna Durkin Richer contributed to this report.

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ALLEN J. SCHABEN Los Angeles Times

GROUNDSKEEPER Manuel Nava leaps over a flooded stretch of Pacific Coast Highway in Sunset Beach.

Winter rains fall, and so do the records

Another major storm is forecast, bringing threats of more flooding and slides.

BY HANNAH FRY AND ALEX WIGGLESWORTH

California's already wet winter is breaking rainfall records, with another powerful storm moving in this weekend along with the threat of new flooding and mudslides.

After a remarkable dry streak in 2024 that helped fuel last January's firestorms, this winter is making up for it, with some areas already approaching average rain totals for the entire season.

"It's been an interesting season," said Mike Wofford, a meteorologist with the National Weather Service in Oxnard. "We're way above normal for precipitation."

The latest storm will usher in gusty wind, more precipitation and possible flooding in burn scar areas.

The cold front moving into the state from the northwest is expected to reach the Los Angeles area by Saturday and bring rain and high-elevation snow through Sunday. In Los Angeles, the rain is expected to be less punishing than the previous storm that triggered significant flooding, road closures and rescues, but it will be heavier along the Central Coast, Wofford said.

The one bright spot is fire conditions. With L.A. about to mark the first anniversary of the Palisades and Eaton fires, the wet winter offers some protections — at least in the short term.

"The amount of rain that we've gotten is likely going to

Billionaire tax pitched as lifeline for Medi-Cal

The proposal is already dividing Democrats — and running into California's aversion to levies

By Seema Mehta and Caroline Petrow-Cohen

The fiery debate about a proposed ballot measure to tax California's billionaires has sparked some soul-searching across the state.

While the idea of a one-time tax on more than 200 people has a long way to go before getting onto the ballot and would need to be passed by voters in November, the tempest around it captures the zeitgeist of angst and anger at the core of California. Silicon Valley is minting new millionaires while millions of the state's residents face the loss of healthcare coverage and struggle with inflation.

Supporters of the proposed billionaire tax say it is one of the few ways the state can provide healthcare for its most vulnerable. Opponents warn it would squish the innovation that has made the state rich and prompt an exodus of wealthy entrepreneurs from the state.

The controversial measure is already creating fractures among powerful Democrats who enjoy tremendous sway in California. Progressive icon Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) quickly endorsed the billionaire tax, while Gov. Gavin Newsom denounced it.

The Golden State's rich residents say they are tired of feeling targeted. Their success has not only created unimaginable wealth but also jobs and better lives for Californians, they say, yet they feel they are being punished.

"California politics forces together some of the richest areas of America with some of the poorest, often separated by just a freeway," said Thad Kousser, a political science professor at UC San Diego. "The impulse to force those with extreme wealth to share their riches is only natural, but often runs into the reality of our anti-tax traditions as well as modern concerns about stifling entrepreneurship or driving job creation out of the state."

The state budget in California is already largely dependent on income taxes paid by its highest earners. Because of that, revenues are prone to volatility, hinging on capital gains from investments, bonuses to executives and windfalls from new stock offerings, and are notoriously difficult for the state to predict.

The tax proposal would cost the state's richest residents about \$100 billion [See Billionaire, A12]



MORTEZA NIKOUBAZL NurPhoto

IRANIAN demonstrators gather for a pro-government rally in southern Tehran.

Trump's power grew in 2025, courtesy of court

Justices set aside rulings that blocked his orders but put two key checks in place.

By DAVID G. SAVAGE

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court, led by Chief Justice John G. Roberts Jr., ended the first year of President Trump's second term with a record of rulings that gave him much broader power to control the federal government.

In a series of fast-track decisions, the justices granted emergency appeals and set aside rulings from district judges who blocked Trump's orders from taking effect.

With the court's approval, the administration dismissed thousands of federal employees, cut funding for education and health research grants, dismantled the agency that funds foreign aid and cleared the way for the U.S. military to reject transgender troops.

But the court also put two important checks on the president's power.

In April, the court twice ruled — including in a post-

midnight order — that the Trump administration could not secretly whisk immigrants out of the country without giving them a hearing before a judge.

Upon taking office, Trump claimed migrants who were alleged to belong to "foreign terrorist" gangs could be arrested as "enemy aliens" and flown secretly to a prison in El Salvador.

Roberts and the court blocked such secret deportations and said the 5th Amendment entitles immigrants, like citizens, a right to "due process of law." Many of the arrested men had no criminal records and said they never belonged to a criminal gang.

Those who face deportation "are entitled to notice and opportunity to challenge their removal," the justices said in Trump vs. J.G.G.

They also required the government to "facilitate" the release of Kilmar Abrego Garcia, who had been wrongly deported to El Salvador. He is now back in Maryland but may face further criminal charges or efforts to deport him.

And last week, Roberts and the court barred Trump [See Justices, A6]

Driving 100 mph could cost license

State's pilot program tightens discipline in bid to curb reckless behavior and deaths.

By KAREN GARCIA

Californians who are caught speeding at more than 100 mph will now face new disciplinary actions imposed by the Department of Motor Vehicles that could include losing their driving privileges.

It's the latest in a series of moves in recent years aimed at trying to reverse increases in fatal car accidents across California. Since 2010, fatalities and serious injuries related to speeding and aggressive driving increased by 52%, according to the California Department of Transportation.

The pilot program, called Forwarded Actions for Speeding Tickets, is a joint

effort by the DMV and the California Highway Patrol, according to the California State Transportation Agency. The program was launched last month.

"We want to take immediate action against dangerous drivers before their carelessness leads to a deadly crash," said Steve Gordon, director of the DMV. "We're being proactive, and together with our CHP partners, we're ready to put the brakes on this reckless behavior."

On average, CHP officers issue about 1,600 citations each month to drivers flying down the road at speeds in excess of 100 mph, according to the California State Transportation Agency. In 2024, the CHP issued more than 18,000 such citations.

Under the new pilot program, every driver who is ticketed by the CHP for exceeding 100 mph — regardless of their prior driving [See Speeding, A14]

